

Beyond the Muskeg:  
Poetic Expressions of a Narrative Inquiry  
Into Curriculum Making and Identity Making  
On the Edges of Community

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## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on identity making and curriculum making on the edges, or margins, of community. Through a narrative inquiry using poetic expression of research, I explore the lives and learning of five participants, three of whom were teachers, all of whom were positioned on the edges of a dominant community. Methodologically, I work within a narrative inquiry framework utilizing personal and participant narratives to understand experience. I employ poetic expression of research as part of my methodology in order to create possibilities for the readers to fill in the gaps of interpretation with their own experience. Poetic expression of research provides multiple opportunities for interpretation and suggests an open-endedness to analysis that prose at times struggles to replicate. Through a focus on the participants' experiences, I examine the possibility of shifting our understanding of spaces conventionally considered marginalized, particularly with respect to the educational value of the experiences lived on the edges of community.

The experiences of the participants in this inquiry suggested that those spaces conventionally thought of as peripheral, or the edges, were actually the defining features of communities. By focusing on the experience of the five participants in this narrative inquiry, this dissertation unpacks the metaphor of marginalization and suggests alternate ways in which to conceptualize positioning within community. Furthermore, the experiences of the participants in this inquiry suggested positioning within community is less important than the relationships we share as teachers with the children and youth we support. Entering into relationship requires a restructuring or reframing of community. Our classrooms, then, become knowledge spaces nested within whatever larger found communities the children and youth we teach experience. Through the research detailed in this dissertation, I argue that rather than attempting to transform the found communities of the children and youth we support, our energies are better directed toward listening to, retelling, and recomposing stories of experience with those children and youth. This dissertation argues that if we thought of each child or youth as central to a community nested within many communities, all of these communities become a source for supporting their learning.

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I would also like to acknowledge the five participants of the inquiry detailed in this dissertation. I would like to thank them for engaging fully with this project and candidly providing the stories that made my analyses of their experiences possible.

Finally, my deepest thanks go out to my partner, Brian Clarke, whose unfailing belief in my work kept me pushing forward. I would not have begun, let alone completed, my doctoral work without your ongoing support.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the participant, Rodriguez, who continued to rise up and declare himself *a whole other game*. Through the stories he shared of experience on the edges of community, my life was forever altered. Rodriguez, your influence and impact remain.

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## CHAPTER 1

### A RETURN TO THE MUSKEG: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BEGINNINGS<sup>1</sup>

#### **Autobiographical Beginnings: Travelling Back Into the Muskeg**

November 30, 2014 – Potato Lake, Saskatchewan

It is six thirty a.m. I have slept in two whole hours compared to my usual morning and still it is dark as pitch outside. Last night when we went to bed, the moon was high in the sky. It shone through the little window of this room and made the frost around the edges of the window glisten. Now, the moon has set and there is no light, no light at all.

As we sat at the table after supper last night with Miriam and Quincy, their dogs outside howled as though they could hear a voice calling to them from somewhere beyond the trees and they were compelled to answer. Three of their fourteen sled dogs lay on the cabin floor by the fire, having finally accepted us into the pack. I thought about our own two dogs at home in the city, having a holiday with the dog sitter, and I missed them, missed my house, and the familiar routine of my life.

We have travelled to Potato Lake, south of La Ronge, in order to attend my Aunt Nora's funeral. We have come here to remember her and to pay our respects from our part of the family. Even though it is just La Ronge, not Toronto or Halifax or someplace equally distant and unfamiliar, it is hours and hours from home. Miriam and Quincy's cabin is cozy and wonderful, all wooden logs and artwork everywhere. They are living

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter were previously published as the article *Liminal lives: Navigating the spaces between (scholar and poet)* in *in education* 20(2) Autumn 2014, pp. 103-120.

their lives in the bush exactly as they wish to live them, here on a small piece of land surrounded by the spindly spruce of northern Saskatchewan with their dog teams and their log cabin. I miss home but I can't help but be impressed by this life that they have carved out of the bush.

Quincy grew up in Weyakwin, not far from La Ronge. I think everyone assumes that all anyone from around here ever really wants to do is just get out of the north but Quincy has stayed near to the place he grew up. Miriam came to La Ronge from Germany several years ago and she also stayed. Both Uncle Gord and Aunt Nora stayed.

It is a long stretch of road through the bush to get here. You travel through prairie as it gives way to parkland, then parkland as it recedes into the northern boreal forest and eventually, Precambrian shield. As we travelled further and further into this landscape, I watched the muskeg on either side press toward the road and recede and press in again as if the bush were breathing – miles and miles of bush too thick even to walk through. Every now and then we would come over a rise in the road and look down across the landscape that receded on either side with no break in the trees and muskeg as far as I could see to the horizon. No lights from houses, no glow from a town or settlement. Nothing except bush. Bush as far as you could see. This is the landscape where I grew up, one small light in the middle of miles of muskeg.

\* \* \*

It is about seven now. Miriam and Quincy are up. I hear Quincy making a fire in the woodstove. Miriam's soft voice murmurs to Quincy and the dogs in her German accent. I wonder how to transition from this warm bed into the living room and kitchen where they sit sipping tea. Transitions are always the most difficult for me – to move from one space to the next with assurance. I am never quite sure of the expectations.

\* \* \*

Ten thirty. A brisk breeze blows the tops of the spindly spruce. They sway together as if dancing in amongst the birch that reach their limbs out wide and splayed around them. Everyone is gone mushing with the dogs. I stayed behind, along with three sad huskies in the yard. I sit at Miriam's kitchen table while the morning sun shines through the trees and casts a faint, golden glow in the room. In the corner stands a glass cabinet full of Inuit carvings. On top sit two kerosene lamps for those times when the

power goes out. I've helped myself to one of Miriam's Christmas oranges. In peeling it, I have squirted orange juice on the page, blurring the words. It is quiet now, so very quiet. I dream of a life this quiet, a life where I am settled and in touch with the flow of my thoughts. This moment would have been lost to me if I hadn't come here, back into the muskeg.

Dotted through the yard are little dog houses, each with a pole to tether a dog to when they return from their run. Miriam and Quincy have removed only enough trees to accommodate the dog houses and the out-buildings. The rest is bush in its natural state. Here, the close trees and the waddling raven do not seem oppressive the way they did when I was young. I do not feel trapped here but rather somehow opened up. Even the chill in the air from the dying fire adds to this feeling of connectedness. A warm room requires effort, requires attention to the details of wood and flame. It makes me wonder how we heated the house at Timber Cover. I don't remember, only that the rooms always seemed cold.

I sense here a different way of being in the world. One of the dogs left behind is howling into the empty air. He sets the other dogs off until they are all howling. Everyone else has been gone a long time. The raven that has been plaguing the dogs all morning for their food waddles by again as a white husky howls at the edge of the bush. Sometimes, between the howls, with only the wind sighing through the loose birch bark on the trees, I feel a sense of something missing. Being here, back in the muskeg, I think about the ways in which we shape our lives. Today, as I look around this kitchen in this log cabin in the bush, I see Miriam and Quincy everywhere in the art on the walls, in the Inuit carvings, even in the way they have their coats and hats and scarves organized by the back door. I wonder if the shape of my own life can be read from the things I have collected around myself.

The wind picks up and tosses the spruce until snow falls in clumps from their boughs. The trees play tricks on the eyes as they move, suggesting something else out there between the branches and snow. Way up above the trees, clouds skitter across the sky. Not everything has some deep, abiding meaning. Sometimes, clouds are just clouds, passing overhead on their way to somewhere else. But they do make me wonder, why do I work so hard to stay in one place? Here in the muskeg, these familiar questions

echo. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? I find I am waiting for an answer, waiting for everyone to return from mushing the dogs, waiting for evening when we will go into town for Aunty's funeral, waiting to go home. (Clarke, personal journal, November 30, 2014)

When I first began my writing for this inquiry, I started with poetry already shaped into vignettes of my childhood and young adulthood. The process of writing that poetry helped me to understand who I was and how I was located within this inquiry. During the course of this inquiry, though, I had occasion to travel back into the literal landscape of my youth. For most of my adulthood I had avoided the place where I had grown up, visiting briefly only a few times over the years to see my father at his cabin on Lac La Ronge or venturing secretly up to drive by the spot where the store at Timber Cover stood beside the highway. In November 2015 my Aunty Nora passed away unexpectedly. Aunty Nora had lived in La Ronge with my father's brother, Uncle Gord, her many children, nieces and nephews, as well as my cousin Susie. I knew how deeply treasured Aunty Nora was to her family and how devastated her family would be at Aunty Nora's passing so I traveled that December to La Ronge to attend my Aunty's funeral and to offer my condolences to the family. As I traveled through the literal landscape of my childhood, I was struck by the ways in which my memories of that place and the experiences there seemed to be pulled forward into the present. I wrote about the experience of traveling back through the muskeg and, in so doing, realized that the landscape of my childhood had become a metaphor for my own identity making. The experience of traveling into the muskeg and then writing about it shaped the structure of my reflections on this inquiry into identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community.

When I refer to the *edges of community*, I refer to a metaphorical space or spaces occupied by people positioned or constructed as marginalized from a dominant norm positioned or constructed as central to a community. In suggesting a reframing of our understanding of spaces conventionally referred to as marginalized, I contend that the notion of marginalization, itself, is a metaphor. Additionally, the metaphor of marginalization has been widely used to describe the disenfranchisement of groups of people within a community (Lorde, 1984; Valencia, 2010; Bhabha, 1990; Ferguson, 1990). In referring to marginalization as a metaphor, I am not suggesting the disenfranchisement of groups is metaphorical. Rather, I contend our way of imagining those experiences as spaces at the edges or in the margins of communities is

metaphorical. Within the metaphor of marginalization, some groups and/or individuals are positioned metaphorically as peripheral to a community and, therefore, less valuable to that community. In this dissertation I attend to the ways in which people's positioning within communities is complex and shifting.

Every day begins for me with writing. I read from the works of other writers and when some piece of what they've written resonates with me, I respond in my own writing to those ideas. Always, my writing returns to my life, to the specific, concrete details that make up my life, to the moments of wonder, the questions, the veiled answers that emerge through all this writing and thinking that comprise my intellectual life. Often, my wondering spirals down into the past, to the origins of my ideas that grew out of a particular moment or in a particular place. With each recollection, I am remade through the retelling of these moments in reflection, the rewriting of my own history again and again. Inevitably, these processes of reflection and recollection through writing lead to poems. In the distillation of language into poetry I find my truest expression of self and thought. This is who I am. Through poetry, I relive the narratives of my life and through that reliving, I become who I am.

Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, and Scheiern (2008) asserted, "Teachers have the right and responsibility to know themselves, and this autobiographical self-knowledge is a gift they can offer students, families, and communities in their charge" (p. 309). Clandinin and Caine (2013) used the terms *autobiographical* or *narrative beginnings* to refer to the personal stories narrative inquirers explore to "make evident the social and political contexts that shaped our understandings" (p. 171). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted, "One of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography" (p. 70). Clandinin and Connelly also said, "narrative beginnings of our own livings, telling, retellings, and reliving help us deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts that we write on our experience of the field experience" (p. 70). In other words, inquiring into our own narrative beginnings is essential to any research endeavor. Examining our own stories along with the stories of our research participants is essential to understanding the identity-making process.

While autobiographical beginnings are only one aspect of narrative inquiry, they constitute an essential component to understanding our own place as researchers within a narrative inquiry. During the inquiry, the researcher, like the participants, is in a state of

becoming. Autobiographical beginnings bring to the surface those factors influencing the researcher's perspectives, thus locating the researcher within the inquiry as well as within a larger life context. Clarke and Murphy (2015) asserted, "as researchers we have an ethical responsibility to tell our story. Attending to narrative beginnings in research demonstrates an understanding of this ethical responsibility" (p. 30). Because I am a narrative inquirer, I attend to my autobiographical beginnings in order to understand myself better as I enter into research alongside my participants. At the same time, I recognize a strong sense of self that identifies as a poet and requires poetic expression as part of those narrative autobiographical beginnings. Leggo (2010) stated, "For stories to be creatively effective, they need to be shaped generatively and generously" (p. 68). Leggo recognized the need to attend to the multiple facets of our identities as researchers when he asserted, "We need spaces for many kinds of research, including lifewriting research that focuses on narrative, autobiographical, fictional, and poetic knowing" (p. 68). I examine my own autobiographical beginnings by sharing four original poems describing key experiences in my own life that shaped my identity and continue to resonate through my research wonders.

### **In the Middle of the Muskeg: Locating Myself Within the Inquiry**

#### Muskeg

I listened in the night  
through the fog of dreams  
to the world asleep  
and not asleep  
around me.  
In the back gabled bedroom  
one narrow window looked out  
over the garage, dark paneling  
the smell of moth balls  
always cold floors.

The wire-springed bed frame  
with the metal headboard  
creaked when I breathed  
and all I could do was breathe  
and breathe  
into the night  
as I listened,  
scurrying in the walls  
relief when grey light

touched the edges of the window  
long before sunlight burned  
past the fire-blackened pine  
and miles of muskeg  
behind the store.

A bulldozer once broke through the loam, Dad said  
and sank until it was lost.  
He said, No one knows how deep  
the muskeg is – so deep  
it might go on forever.  
We clung to a strip of gravel,  
an atoll in a sea of muskeg.  
You couldn't go anywhere.  
There was nowhere to go –  
our lives defined  
by the gravel pad  
that kept us all from sinking  
out of sight.

These days I don't travel far from home.  
I stay inside this room,  
wonder if the rest of the world exists  
or if I lie awake still afraid  
surrounded by miles of muskeg. (Clarke, 2013b)<sup>2</sup>

In the development of Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) concept of curriculum making, identity making is tied strongly to curriculum making. Understood as a course of life, curriculum making, by natural extension, is viewed as life writing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). From this perspective, it is clear that the child in the poem *Muskeg* is engaged in an act of life writing and, as an adult who reflects on this moment, as a researcher I am also engaged in an act of life writing, of identity making, while inquiring into significant curriculum making moments in my autobiographical beginnings. Furthermore, as readers, as ones who receive this information and interpret it through the lens of your own experiences, you become participants in the process as well.



Muskeg.m4a

<sup>2</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



In this poem I express the sense of isolation and disconnection that permeated my life growing up in northern Saskatchewan. The poem *Muskeg* is concretely situated in a place that actually existed. In the early seventies, the highway to La Ronge in northern Saskatchewan was the only highway leading in and out of the north. When I first moved there with my parents and two of my brothers, the road itself was unpaved. My parents' store perched on a gravel-reinforced lot at the junction of Highway #2 and #969 leading to Montreal Lake. On either side of the highway, except for the gravel pad where we lived, muskeg stretched for miles in every direction, creating both a geographical and metaphorical barrier to movement.

Clandinin and Caine (2013) said, "Place directs attention to places where lives were lived as well as to the places where inquiry events occur" (p. 167). Of all the places that I have lived in my life, my recollections constantly return to Timber Cove and life on the edges of the muskeg. The persistence of these memories indicates that the experiences lived out on the edges of the muskeg hold deeply rooted connections to the research wonders I carry with me today.

I first began to explore the threads of the poem *Muskeg* in January 2012 as I thought about what part of my own life created an interest to understand better the experience of marginalization. In my own journal writing, I reached back to a place where a sense of isolation and marginalization were most acute. In my journal I wrote about my experiences growing up in northern Saskatchewan as someone transplanted into that landscape – a landscape that was, to me, foreign. In retrospect, however, I realized that it was not the landscape that was foreign but rather I who was foreign to the landscape. The poem, however, is a deeper expression of the recollection of feeling foreign to one's surroundings. *Muskeg*, in its temporal movement between the past and the present, connects the experiences of the poet as a child to the experiences of the poet as an adult and to the experiences of the poet as a researcher. Methodologically, the poetic expression of those recollections reaches deeper than the recollections explicated in the journal entries. The poetic form more richly captures the complexity of those experiences that acted to shape my identity as a poet and that continue to shape my identity as a researcher.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on the work of Schon (1979), Clandinin and Connelly (1992) asserted, "metaphors are no mere 'anomalies of language' but are instead expressions of living" (p. 369).

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<sup>3</sup> In chapter three I discuss at length my incorporation of poetic expression into the methodology of narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly went further to assert the importance of metaphor in understanding teacher narratives by stating, “we and other teachers are, in an important sense, living our images and metaphors” (p.369). To understand *Muskeg* as illustrative of a moment in my story to live by<sup>4</sup> (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) as a curriculum maker, as a life writer, it is necessary to understand the metaphor of the muskeg that permeates this poem.

Muskeg is the Cree word for bog. The muskeg in the poem was a dangerous place because you could break through the thin layers of mossy soil and drown in the water below. In this way, the muskeg defined the place where I grew up as a negative space, void of value, surrounding the small man-made gravel island built up beside the highway that was solid enough to support the store with its living quarters upstairs. Furthermore, the muskeg in the poem represents the limitations that grow out of the fear of the unknown. The landscape described in the poem identifies the sense of limitation I felt as a young girl living so far away from anyone else. As a child, I remember the familial travelling in and out of communities that my parents identified as more valuable in relation to our home place on the gravel pad. Always the muskeg was a benchmark for our lives in relation to other communities. As an adult, I recognize that the muskeg has become a benchmark for my research and wonderings, both autobiographical and in relation to curriculum making. When I was growing up beside the muskeg, we moved through the borders of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, our identities shifting as we travelled through each day and through each landscape. This movement through the borders of communities that I never seemed to belong to regardless of their make-up has created in me a persistent desire to understand more deeply the experience of being on the edges of community.

As I consider the experiences detailed in the poem *Muskeg*, I realize that this poem also recognizes the impact of the stories that parents tell to keep their children grounded to the same place, stories that limit their sense of agency and mobility, stories that also work to keep them safe. The story of the bulldozer sinking into the muskeg was a cautionary tale told by my father to keep my siblings and me out of the muskeg, to keep us safe from harm. It accomplished more than that, though – for the longest time, it defined what was possible and what was not possible.

A landscape of limitation, a landscape defined by borders of fear, of isolation, of the unknown, shaped my understanding of experience as also defined by limitation and

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<sup>4</sup> The term *stories to live by* was originally used by Heilbrun (1988). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) developed a narrative understanding of the term to describe the connection between narrative and identity.

marginalization. This definition of the landscape grew out of my experience as someone transplanted into the landscape instead of being a part of it. Furthermore, in my contemplations of the historical significance of our arrival and our lives on the gravel atoll beside the muskeg, as an adult I recognize that we were settlers<sup>5</sup> in the muskeg and lived with the settlers' mentality of mixing only with other settlers, not with those indigenous to the area. As Clarke and Murphy (2015) pointed out, from my earliest days living on the edges of the muskeg and on the edges of the indigenous communities of that landscape, a dichotomy of self and other was strongly established by my parents in which I did not belong either to the home place where we lived or to the indigenous communities surrounding us. Perhaps our lives might have been less permeated by a sense of isolation and disconnection if we had allowed ourselves the community of the people indigenous to the area. Perhaps they might have taught us to view the landscape as less harsh or less inhospitable if we had been open to cultivating community with those for whom the landscape was home.

Not long ago I had the opportunity to share my musings on the muskeg with a group of colleagues during a research retreat. In an astounding moment of serendipity, one of the research retreat participants shared that he, too, came from the area my poem describes. As we talked about the importance of this place to the development of my identity, this person shared a very different and much more positive experience of the muskeg. This sparked in me a wondering around whether or not and how our experiences of inclusion and exclusion might be, at least in part, a matter of perspective or context. What if that perspective was provided an opportunity to shift? How might such a shift in perspective influence the identity-making growing out of that experience of place? The wonderings that grew out of my experiences living on the edges of the muskeg led to the research wonders that drive this inquiry into life and learning on the edges of community. In this inquiry I inquire into the identity making and curriculum making of my participants as they navigated their whole lives on the edges of community, people conventionally positioned as marginalized or peripheral to those communities. Although I bring an educational lens to my inquiry, I was not constrained by that perspective. In this way I have

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term settler in Regan's (2010) sense of the word to refer not only to "Euro-Canadians whose ancestors came to Canada during the colonial period but also to more recent immigrants from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are part of contemporary settler society" (p. 240).

sought to glean from the larger picture of lives lived on the edges of community how we, as educators, might shift our thinking and practice related to those spaces.

My poem *Muskeg* describes a distinct location but also describes the passage of time and how the experiences of childhood reverberate through our adult selves. Furthermore, it clearly articulates the sense of isolation present in the researcher-poet's life – the feeling that the ability to interact socially was somehow impaired by a childhood spent living in isolation. These feelings and memories are integral to identity making, particularly my identities as researcher and as poet. They are present in the poem and they are present in the curriculum-making moments I shape alongside children and colleagues. As someone who has lived in a space defined primarily by limitations, I am aware of the ways in which we, as teachers, limit our students' experiences not only to define them but also to confine them within the expectations of the planned curriculum<sup>6</sup> (Aoki, 2005a; 2005b). Evident, too, are the ways in which the lived curriculum (Aoki, 2005a) can have a lasting impact on a person's sense of agency<sup>7</sup> and ability<sup>8</sup>, how it can define what a person believes is possible. It is this understanding of my autobiographical beginnings as a researcher-poet experienced through the writing and retelling of my poems that heightens my interest in learning more about the ways in which life on the edges of community unfolds for others.

### **Life on the Edges: Navigating the Changing Landscape of Autobiographical Beginnings**

#### The Blue Dress

I remember the details  
preserved like dried beans in a mason jar  
one hundred and forty-five dollars a month  
for the bachelor suite at Nesbit Apartments  
half of what I made a month in my job  
working the desk at the YWCA –  
one room no bigger than a bedroom

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<sup>6</sup> Aoki (2005a) distinguishes between “curriculum-as-plan” (p. 159) and “curriculum-as-lived” (p. 160).

Curriculum-as-plan refers to curriculum documents developed to indicate to teachers how they should implement curriculum in the classroom. Curriculum-as-lived refers to the life experiences students and teachers live out in the classroom from day to day despite what planning has occurred. When I use the terms planned curriculum and lived curriculum, I am drawing on Aoki's conceptions of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived respectively.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term agency to refer to a person's “capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” as defined in Merriam-Webster.

<sup>8</sup> Within the context of this dissertation, I use the term ability to refer to perceptions, individual or imposed, of a person's “quality or state of being able” as defined by Merriam-Webster. In this sense, I use the term ability in its broadest sense while remaining aware that current scholarship has begun to challenge conventional notions of ability and disability.

kitchen in a closet and a bathroom  
with a claw-foot tub  
circa 1912 hardwood  
three tall windows  
facing West.

In the way back  
before language  
every thought is an image  
sealed in cellophane.  
I am visiting my dad's mom  
in an apartment with the same floors.  
She wears a blue dress and sips Red Rose tea  
beside the same three windows.  
Something in her frown  
and concrete chin  
frightens me  
so I never wear a blue dress –  
only blue jeans and loose peasant blouses.

My bed is under the windows  
to catch the scraps of breeze  
lifting from burning asphalt –  
downtown Prince Albert in the summer,  
as big to me then as Los Angeles  
or New York; big enough  
to hide from change  
two floors above  
the street. (Clarke, 2013d)<sup>9</sup>

*The Blue Dress* is a poem that, like *Muskeg*, captures the experience of living on the edges of community. It describes my memories and my living situation as a young woman who feared she would become like her grandmother, whose life had always seemed confined within her small apartment with little prospect for interaction outside. Like *Muskeg*, this poem relies heavily on a sense of place and provides concrete images of the details that define that space. Less concrete, however, is the developing identity revealed within the poems, often through the juxtaposition of images rather than the explicit detailing of cause and effect. I depict my grandmother through the lens of my eyes as a very young child whose impression is of a



<sup>9</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

grandmother who is rigid, unmoving, and ultimately unhappy. In reconstructing this memory, I drew a connection between my grandmother's sternness to the place where my grandmother lived as well as what she wore. Within the poem, however, a temporal shift occurs in which the past reaches forward to claim the present. Two perspectives exist simultaneously in the poem – that of the child, as remembered by the adult, and that of the adult herself. The child, now grown, finds herself in the same or a similar apartment as the one that her grandmother lived in and despite the young woman's ritual act of never wearing a blue dress, she struggles to live a different story from her grandmother's story. There is also a sense of unfolding awareness in the poem as the speaker realizes life in the apartment is both similar to and different from her grandmother's life. This sense of the familiar within the unfamiliar creates a moment in the woman's life where she is stuck in place – unable to enact change and move forward and also unable to accept the life she is living. As the poet and as the researcher reflecting on these moments, I am both retelling and reliving these moments in light of my current understandings.

As with the place described in the poem *Muskeg*, the apartment described in the poem *The Blue Dress* is an actual place that I lived in when I was twenty-two. The descriptions in the poem of my apartment are as accurate as memory allows, not fictionalized or, as far as I can recall, exaggerated. I also distinctly remember visiting my grandmother in a similar apartment when I was very young. Her apartment certainly was located within the same downtown neighbourhood. It may even have been within the same building, although that memory is unclear. What is clear, however, are the emotions that persistently cling to the memory and my remembered determination to avoid my grandmother's solitary lifestyle. Grandma lived alone in that little apartment and I lived alone in my similar little apartment. It seemed to me at that time that my life was replicating the experiences I thought my grandmother had experienced. I viewed that as negative and in danger of defining who I would become in later adulthood. I cannot say specifically why this was so concerning to me. I recall that it was tied to the employment I had as the night receptionist at the YWCA, which provided only enough money to live on and not enough to change my life circumstances. My income certainly would have categorized me within the group of the working poor but as a young woman this was an accepted income bracket. All of my friends who were not living at home were living in similar tiny apartments and reveling in their freedom. I was not reveling. I was wondering how I would keep myself from being trapped within that socioeconomic space and place forever. In *The Blue*

*Dress* both the child and her adult self demonstrate a complex mix of desire for change and fear of change. It is a position that the young woman in the poem experiences, that I experienced – a position that the woman must adopt due to circumstances – and it is a positioning, a space and place that the young woman chooses to remain in. In my wondering about the lives and learning of people positioned as marginalized, I have wondered if they, too, experience a complex mix of desire for change and fear of change. Is this a common thread for people living on the edges of community?

Socioeconomic status is one of the ways in which we define ourselves or can be defined by others. Terms such as poor, middle class, affluent all serve descriptive purposes in relation to some more or less articulated norm. While it can be argued that these methods of defining people or groups of people are inherently constructions with no connection to the actual experiences and life circumstances of people, there can be no doubt that these overarching categories do have an influence on the ways in which people define themselves. Bourdieu (1987) wrote:

In fact, it is possible to deny the existence of classes as homogeneous sets of economically and socially differentiated individuals objectively constituted into groups, and to assert at the same time the existence of a space of differences based on a principle of economic and social differentiation. (p. 3)

These social constructions, however relevant or irrelevant they might appear, are part of a landscape of identity making that emerges out of the experiences of people. In *The Blue Dress* my younger self recognizes the starkness of her grandmother's apartment and connects it to her grandmother's identity as harsh and rigid. Rightly or wrongly, my younger self creates a causal relationship between the space/place and the identity of her grandmother. When she finds herself living in a strikingly similar space, she struggles to ensure that her identity development does not become indelibly influenced by the landscape surrounding her. Ironically, as the poem reveals, the influence of the landscape is inescapable. The identity of the young woman is shaped nevertheless by the landscape, even as a response to the landscape or a counter to her understanding of the landscape's influence on her grandmother's identity formation. Inevitably, the young woman's identity grows out of the landscape.

In contemplating the themes and metaphors of *The Blue Dress* and *Muskeg*, I began to wonder what part of our experiences might be externally generated and what parts might be

internally endured or accepted. At what point do we begin to story ourselves in the ways that we are storied? Is it possible to mark the transition or, concomitantly, to resist the transition? Do people living and learning on the edges of community inevitably come to see themselves as marginalized? Hutchinson (personal communication, February 14, 2015) drew my attention to the physical landscape surrounding the apartment in *The Blue Dress* by pointing out that the town named in the poem, Prince Albert, publically proclaims itself to be “the gateway to the North.” Geographically and metaphorically, this space/place declares itself to be a threshold, a liminal space. *The Blue Dress* depicts another threshold. Alluded to but not stated in the poem is the sense of hovering on the edges of change, of moving through a liminal space of indeterminate distance toward an unknown destination. The liminal space of the apartment described in *The Blue Dress* functions as a metaphor for marginalization. The speaker, during the moment depicted in the poem, has paused between communities on the edges of the one she hopes to leave and on the edges of one she hopes to enter.

We experience *The Blue Dress* as a retelling. Dyson (personal communication, February 24, 2015) said, “I can see that this poem of experience works as an interim research text enabling reflexivity, allowing you to re-experience, to re-reflect and reconsider your feelings and responses.” Indeed, in the poem I look back from some future that has escaped the apartment with the three windows facing west, just as the speaker in *Muskeg* escaped the gravel atoll. But these escapes are not the foci of the poems. They are incidental, inferred, with the primary focus being the experiences of isolation and marginalization, combined with a general wondering about the details that might comprise the experiences. Yet, as the poet, I no longer live either on the edge of the muskeg or in the apartment from *The Blue Dress*. I am not sure, however, if it is possible to view my movement out of the muskeg and subsequently that apartment as having escaped from those places since their impact on my identity making and curriculum making remains. A part of me still experiences that sense of living on the edges of community explored in this poem. The experience of the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) endures and informs my present experience.

Hutchinson (personal communication, February 14, 2015) wondered if the tensions between being trapped and escaping in *The Blue Dress* were as prevalent for my grandmother as they were in my retelling of that experience. What choices did she make, he wondered, and how did she perceive her experiences? I have storied my grandmother as someone trapped within her



circumstances. I remember her as constrained by pessimism and an overt dissatisfaction with others. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away many years ago and I was unable to broach the subject with her. Now, her stories are filtered through the experience of those who remain to retell them. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) stated, “Experience, for the pragmatist, is always more than we can know and represent in a single statement, paragraph, or book. Every representation, therefore, no matter how faithful to that which it tries to depict, involves selective emphasis of our experience” (p. 39). These tensions between my grandmother’s experiences and my retelling of those experiences through the frame of my own experiences remain unresolved.

*Muskeg* and *The Blue Dress* both function as interim research texts and research texts.<sup>10</sup> They focus the researcher-poet on both the experiences detailed in the poems and the experience of the poems, which is to say they “slide back and forth between records of the experience under study and records of oneself as researcher experiencing the experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 87). As I inquired into these poems, I learned not only more about the experiences detailed there but also about myself as a researcher inquiring into those experiences. The process, I realized, was ongoing, without a stopping point. In this way, we are always *in medias res* – researchers, poets, individuals in the middle of our stories to live by even as we pause to inquire into them.

### **Beyond the Edges: Crossing the Boundaries of Identity Within Autobiographical Beginnings**

#### Old Road

Drift of exhaust  
past apartments, vacant lots  
dusty from too little rain

reminders of cool, green scrub brush grown thick  
among blackened stumps barely taller  
than my eleven-year-old head  
blueberries warm with summer’s watching  
always watching  
for bears on the old road  
to the dump.

One day

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<sup>10</sup> During my discussion of methodology I will explain more fully how poems can function both as interim research texts and research texts in a narrative inquiry shaped by the poetic expression of research.

my brothers and I followed that road  
past where it ended in a ditch  
cut crossways to keep cars out.  
We followed it through bush  
thick as planted corn, sometimes  
hardly a track amongst the spruce and poplar  
until we burst out onto a highway  
surprising us, stranding us  
up to our waists  
in Labrador Tea. (Clarke, 2013c)<sup>11</sup>

The poem *Old Road* demonstrates the inward/outward/forward/backward movement of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; 2000):

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality – past, present, and future. . . . *to experience the experience* – that is, to do research into an experience – is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50)

In the beginning of *Old Road* the perspective is from the present – the speaker is travelling in a vehicle, experiencing the smell of exhaust and noticing the urban landscape of apartments and vacant lots. The vegetation of the vacant lots reminds her of a different landscape and she moves temporally from the present to the past through her memories of the “scrub brush grown thick / among blackened stumps” (Clarke, 2013c). Not only does she move backward temporally but also she moves inward emotionally to recall her fear of watching for bears on the road leading to the dump.

The experience of moving inward and backward produces the recollection of a specific moment in the poet’s life – the day she explored the old road with her brothers. The description of their experiences following the old road beyond the boundaries of their community – “past where it ended in a ditch / cut crossways to keep cars out” (Clarke, 2013c) – can be read literally. This is the description of a particular experience, a specific day and a specific activity, even a



Old Road.m4a

<sup>11</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

specific landscape through which the children traveled to discover what lay beyond their community.

At the same time, expressed poetically, the articulation of the experience invites us to think metaphorically about this experience as well. Anzaldua (1987) wrote, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (p. 25). By following a forbidden path, the children in *Old Road* breached the boundary of their community to inquire into what might lie beyond. Metaphorically, this poem is an exploration of possibility, of what might exist outside of established boundaries, both in terms of experience and identity. It is also an expression of the dangers of such activities. It details the emotion associated with the act of stepping outside of established norms, moving beyond the borders or edges of a community. It is in the metaphorical contemplation of the experience of border crossing that the deeper meaning for the poet as an adult emerges. What is the meaning of the experience of venturing beyond the boundaries of community? What might it mean in light of the descriptions and meanings provided in *Muskeg* and *The Blue Dress*? Taken as a suite of experiences, these poems suggest a deeper motivation at work in the experiences of the girl and her brothers. The speaker and characters in each of these poems essentially explore the same question: what, if anything, lay beyond the muskeg, beyond the borders of community?

At the end of *Old Road*, the trio “burst out onto a highway” as an unexpected outcome of their explorations. Their surprise prevents them from following the highway. The image of the trio stranded “up to our waists / in Labrador Tea” suggests an inability to move beyond the known into the unknown. Anzaldua (1987) recognized the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (p. 25). The analogy of being stranded up to their waists in Labrador Tea suggests the forces at work in the lives of individuals to persuade stasis, to keep a person in their comfort zone even if that comfort zone isn’t all that comfortable. The Labrador Tea that surrounds the children is a plant indigenous to the bush of northern Saskatchewan. It is a common plant in the landscape. It represents the boundary of what is known and familiar to the children. The highway represents the unknown, the unfamiliar. Like the children stranded up to their waists in Labrador Tea, perhaps for some, living and learning on the edges of community is more comfortable, more familiar, than venturing beyond the edges or margins into the unknown. Certainly, the poetic

expression of these experiences in *Muskeg*, *The Blue Dress*, and *Old Road* raises questions about the boundaries of communities, the forces that influence individuals to adhere to those boundaries or, concomitantly, to pass through them and how the experiences of living and learning on the edges of community resonate through a person's life to create a metaphorical echo that repeatedly influences identity making. As Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) asserted, "In a narrative inquiry, stories are not just a medium of learning, development, or transformation, but also a life" (p. 578). As we compose narratives, then, we are composed.

### **Living In-Between: Navigating Our Multiple Stories to Live By**

#### Before

Before  
there were Sunday suppers  
spaghetti with meat sauce  
brown bag lunches with smiling faces  
soft green dresses  
patent leather shoes –  
white gloves for church  
white socks for school.

Before  
there were Halloween pillowcases filled with candy  
spruce trees heavy with tinsel  
hand-kneaded doughnuts, wood stoves, tea.  
Every bed made itself  
every mitten found its mate  
every afternoon started its own fire  
to chase the chill away before supper.

I still look for smoke  
rising from the chimney  
a familiar face alive  
in the kitchen window  
as the bus pulls away  
down the lane. (Clarke, 2013a)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



Before.m4a

In this final poem of my autobiographical beginnings, *Before* breaks from the previously discussed themes of marginalization and movement through the borders of community to capture a time in my life when there was narrative coherence<sup>13</sup> in my experiences and all the details of those experiences reinforced a sense of belonging and safety. The irony of the poem, of course, is that it begins by looking back to a time of easy predictability, immediately suggesting that the landscape of belonging has shifted and grown into something decidedly different from the experiences detailed in the first two stanzas. Stanza one and stanza two begin with the temporal benchmark of “Before” although we are never told “Before” what. As readers we can assume “Before” refers to an experience so significant that it makes the experiences detailed in the poem stand out in contrast. It is here that we see the effectiveness of using poetic expression as opposed to prose. In prose there is a structural expectation to complete a thought, to tell or at least show a full story of what came before, what intervened, and what came after as the conventional form of a prose narrative. In prose, even inferences must be precise and decipherable. With poetry it is possible, often expected, to leave unspoken the intervening event, creating possibility for the reader to fill in the gaps with their own experience. These gaps provide multiple opportunities for interpretation and suggest an open-endedness to analysis that prose at times struggles to replicate.

The event of my mother’s death when I was seventeen stands as a benchmark for all other experiences in my life. This is the experience referred to in *Before* without explicitly being stated. It is not necessary to know this detail in order to understand the significance of the intervening event. In the poem *Before* we read the silence and fill in the gap in detail with our own experience. Interestingly, *Before* also describes a place, and the human components of that space – my life before the muskeg. The scenes depicted were recreated from memories of my childhood before we moved to the muskeg; yet it was ten years after our move to the muskeg that my mother passed away. The intervening event is conflated with the move to the muskeg. Despite the temporal distortion, the poem depicts a narrative coherence in the experiences of the poet prior to the life event of her mother’s death. The coherence of those experiences resonates through what came afterwards, so much so that the poet imagines arriving home to find the same wood smoke rising from the chimney and the same treasured person watching for her from the

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<sup>13</sup> I will discuss narrative coherence later in relation to its importance as a concept within narrative inquiry.

kitchen window. In the sense that this experience is imagined, it is a forward-looking story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), one that imagines a reconstruction of narrative coherence in the poet-researcher's story to live by. At the same time, it holds within it the seed of a backward-looking story, the realization that the person she hopes to see there will never be there. The past and the present exist at the same time in this narrative and through the images provided by the poet, vie for centrality. Together, the four poems (*Muskeg*, *The Blue Dress*, *Old Road* and *Before*) individually and collectively provide a sense of where the researcher-poet comes from, where I come from – the experiences that shaped my identity and that resonate with me today, informing the relationships I develop with research participants and the insights and interpretations that grow out of those relationships.

Brady (2009) emphasized the impossibility of remaining objective as a researcher. In quantitative research, data is said to speak for itself but, as Brady pointed out, “Nothing speaks for itself. Interpretation is as necessary to human life as breathing” (p. xi). Brady's expression of the researcher's involvement in interpreting data reminds me of Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) emphasis on the importance of autobiographical beginnings in narrative inquiry. Only when we begin to understand our own narrative beginnings do we situate ourselves positively toward understanding the personal and relational understandings that grow out of narrative inquiry.

Inquiring into our own narrative beginnings is essential to any research endeavor. At the same time, trying to maintain a professional distance from myself as I tried to make meaning of my own personal narratives led to a sense of being split in two that I found impossible to suppress. It was difficult to separate or compartmentalize my understanding of self into the professional and the personal as conventional academic discourse suggests I should. This is part of the reason why poetry takes a prominent position in my research. I cannot separate my identity as a poet from my identity as a researcher. The two co-exist in my work in the same way they co-exist in my life. It is all part of a whole that wonders about life in general and seeks to make sense of life holistically, not one compartment at a time. The children who come into our classrooms also come with a holistic wondering about the world and about life as a whole, not just about the subjects we say are valuable or in the order and timelines that we present them. In this way, my inability to compartmentalize the personal and the professional mirrors

children's inability to separate themselves from their identity as student and their identities as daughters, sons, grandchildren, or whatever other identities they might hold.

Eisner and Vallance (1974), in discussing conceptions of curriculum, recognized that all orientations represent "a range of distinct conceptual biases" (p. 2). As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) said, "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak" (p. 94). In the same way, the categories or compartments of our lives bleed together, one into the other, until they are indistinguishable as categories and become the liquid in a fluid process that flows from one moment to the next without interruption. As researchers who struggle to separate our own identities into categories, we recognize the inappropriateness of trying to do the same in our exploration of the identity making of our research participants, whether they are children or adults, in a school setting or somewhere else. Identity making and curriculum making are, by their very nature, complex and ongoing. Our explorations into identity making and curriculum making should reflect that complexity. It is within this context of complexity and ongoing process that I explore identity making and curriculum making further within the context of my research wonders about life and learning on the edges of community.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXPLORING THE EDGES OF THE MUSKEG: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY, CURRICULUM MAKING, AND IDENTITY MAKING ON THE EDGES OF COMMUNITY

#### **Fields of Vision: Shifting Perspectives on Community and Identity Making**

##### If We Steel Ourselves

She is in the middle  
of transition. She feels it  
the changing light  
afternoon fading  
full with the click of keys  
the infinite feet of a thousand  
fireflies, dancing.  
All thoughts, all words  
reflect back without anything  
profound to mark their passing.  
Echoes of the divine leave her  
wondering, how could she,  
could she make a difference?

The beauty of routine  
gently fingers the growing dusk  
to enter more deeply into  
the ritual of life.  
She thinks,  
we can question the significance  
of work, of play, of love, or  
separation, question where the meaning  
lies  
in any of it, in all of it



what is most important  
what can pass away without  
concern, without grief.

Today, she thinks,  
meaning is the sacredness of each detail –  
the towel hung over the shower rod to dry.  
The soap arranged in a dish  
placed beside a star-shaped tea light  
on top of a porcelain tank.  
A clean mirror.  
The aging bath mat that still matches the towels.  
The ankle-bracelet, broken, hanging  
from the spine of a journal, four round peace signs  
attached at regular intervals from its silver chain.  
Today, she sits at her desk and thinks  
it is enough. Today, she feels  
it is enough. (Clarke, 2015c)<sup>14</sup>

*If We Steel Ourselves* is a poem I wrote to express my tentativeness as an emerging researcher navigating an entry into a narrative inquiry with five participants positioned on the edges of community. I share the poem here as an interim research text to highlight the necessity of staying grounded within my own experience as a researcher and as an individual as I moved into relationship with my research participants. The poem is both a methodological query into the importance of relational ethics in research as well as an example of the ways in which theoretical perspectives informed my meaning making during this inquiry. Like in the poem, again and again I returned to the foundation of the particular in order to make sense of the narratives I heard and composed during the time of this inquiry. My sense of myself as a researcher, my identity making and my curriculum making, were and are deeply grounded in the theoretical perspectives of narrative inquiry with its emphasis on experience.

As I considered my own process of identity making and the importance of understanding my autobiographical beginnings as I entered into these explorations of identity making, I was reminded of the poem *Walking at Brighton* by Dave Margoshes (1988). In his poem, Margoshes explored the retrospective narrative of a speaker who recalls feeling on the edges of his familial



If We Steel Ourselves.m4a

<sup>14</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

community, “and I was a stranger in the family, / always walking behind where the view is different” (p. 16). I recognize the sentiment expressed in Margoshes’ poem of being a stranger within your own family. The community of my family was not a community in which I was comfortable. Like Margoshes’ speaker, I seemed always to see things from a different perspective than my siblings or parents, suddenly and consistently bumping up against my difference and their difference even though on the surface we shared the same circumstances and, superficially at least, the same history.

In my own family, I lived the curriculum of exclusion that Clandinin et al. (2010) detailed in the context of dominant school narratives, where the exclusion of personal narratives excludes and discourages individuals from seeking connection with those who appear to fit into the dominant school narrative. My sense of disconnect came not so much from a dominant cultural narrative in conflict with my identity as it did from a familial narrative that storied me as separate, as different. These identities that I carried with me, that I still carry with me, of feeling isolated and separate, apart from community, are integrally connected to my identity as a curriculum maker and a researcher. They are present in the narratives that emerged from my life as well as in the moments shaped by interaction with colleagues and children. Through my own experiences, I was predisposed to notice difference, to wonder about the nature of belonging and to explore exclusion as both a theoretical and a literal life experience. From my earliest days a binary of self and other was strongly established in my experience primarily through familial curriculum making<sup>15</sup> (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011) moments. From my very earliest days through my own sense of not belonging to the community of my family I began to question the dichotomous positioning of the centre and the edges of community. I began to wonder which, if any, group I belonged to or if, in fact, I might belong to both.

Clandinin et al. (2010) recognized, “Within the institutional landscape, claiming an identity can be more challenging than passively accepting one” (p. 473). I wonder if it is not only in the institutional landscape but also in all landscapes, including the family, where identity making remains a complex and tenuous process. In the midst of this fragile process, I wonder what happens when a child’s sense of themselves is under attack by a dominant narrative that

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<sup>15</sup> Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) identified familial curriculum making as curriculum making that occurs outside of school settings. They stated: “Understanding children and youths as people experiencing curriculum-rich lives in their families and diverse community settings means understanding curriculum making beyond the school” (p. 150).

does not fit coherently with her own. I wonder what it means in terms of identity making to be excluded so readily and so regularly that the only comfortable space is the space that excludes. What does it mean to identity making to recognize yourself as positioned on the outside looking in or, as Margoshes (1988) framed it, to “always be walking behind where the view is different” (p. 16)?

Dewey (1938) suggested context becomes the truth of a present experience, informing our understanding of narratives as we endeavor to unpack them. Jackson (1992) also supported an emphasis on context by arguing, “all experience is necessarily situational and contextualized... there is no privileged position outside of experience from which to achieve a free and independent (i.e., non-contextualized) perspective” (p. 10). Jackson acknowledged the presence of bias in all forms of inquiry and research by stating, “we begin our search for answers already faced in one direction or another, our proclivities pre-established, our inclinations making us lean this way or that” (p. 20). Essentially, Jackson argued for recognition of researcher bias rather than a futile attempt to claim objectivity and distance. If we examine the metaphor of facing in a particular direction, it becomes clear that we can only see what is within our field of vision – our perspectives, then, are metaphorically determined by the field of vision defined by the direction in which we look. This perspective or field of vision can be likened to the researcher’s theoretical perspective. Furthermore, the researcher’s theoretical perspective then becomes an important context informing the research.

Jackson’s (1992) recognition of probable bias fits well with Dewey’s (1938) ideas about contextualized perspective. Together they established that our perspectives never exist in a void but rather grow out of a context that turns in one direction or another prior to exploration. This is not to say that a person cannot change the direction in which she faces. Jackson referred to our proclivity, preference, and context intersecting to create a propensity for one position or another. As Jackson put it, “there can be no position *outside* interpretation, there is no non-interpretive stance. There are only *ways of looking*, a category that includes *ways of looking at ways of looking*” (p. 20). Here, Jackson made a nod to the multiple layers of exploration that inform our perspectives as we look and as we look at how we look – meta-vision, so to speak. Our understandings, by their very nature, are at best multi-layered, personal interpretations, which are informed by both our own personal contexts as well as our theoretical contexts.

Why do we choose the threads we choose when we begin to unpack the field texts from our research? Why do we notice the things we then attend to? What is it in our own experiences that shape a particular research experience? Brady (2009) pointed out, “all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as a personally-situated sensuous and intellectual being” (p. xi). As the four poems from my autobiographical beginnings, as well as the personal narrative that opened this dissertation, clearly demonstrated, each person, each researcher is personally-situated within a context that is unique. Our meaning making is inextricably bound up with our identity and with the experiences that we have and carry with us. My own experiences of living in an isolated part of northern Saskatchewan within a family in which I felt different shaped my interest in understanding the human experience of marginalization. It motivated me to rethink the way we frame marginalization and to ask whether or not we might see that space as constructed through identity and experience as something determined individually and organically as a result of our experiences. It is my experiences and my sense making of those experiences that have driven me to ask questions about life and learning on the edges of community.

### **Research Wonders about Life and Learning on the Edges of Community**

The ontological and epistemological foundation of my theoretical and research perspectives lay in my identity as a narrative inquirer, which means that I “see individuals as living storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.24). Like Clandinin and Connelly, who recognized that “narrative inquiry is central to our understanding of experience” (p. 24), I seek constantly, through my research, to understand more deeply the unfolding of the storied lives of people from the perspectives of curriculum making and identity making. I share with other narrative inquirers the perspective that “Understanding life, experience, narratively, is our research and our life project” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 24).

My understanding of the theoretical perspective of narrative inquiry is influenced by a number of scholars. Clandinin (2013) stated succinctly, “narrative inquirers study experience” (p. 13). Connelly and Clandinin (1999; 2006) asserted that humans lead storied lives, holding to a Dewey-inspired view of experience (Clandinin, 2013). Bruner (2002) focused on the importance of narrative to human understanding by stating, “Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow” (p. 93). Pinnegar (2006) pointed

out the inconclusive nature of narrative inquiry and identified its appropriateness for exploring the experiences of people. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) stated:

we become narrative inquirers only when we recognize and embrace the interactive quality of the researcher-researched relationship, primarily use stories as data and analysis, and understand the way in which what we know is embedded in a particular context, and finally that narrative knowing is essential to our inquiry. (p. 7)

In my ontology and epistemology, I function from a narrative perspective, drawing on the scholarly tradition of narrative inquiry, seeking always to understand the connection between experience, identity making, and curriculum making.

In this chapter I explore theoretical perspectives on community, curriculum making, and identity making pertaining to the social construction of positioning within community. I discuss my research wonders related to the life and learning people experience on the edges of community in spaces and places often characterized by dominant narratives as marginalized. I go on to explore a broadened understanding of curriculum making rooted in Dewey's (1938) understanding of experience through the curriculum making theories of Clandinin and Connelly (1992; 2000). This understanding of curriculum making identifies curriculum as a course of life which includes not only subject matter, but also Schwab's (1973; 1983) conceptions of the four curriculum commonplaces of learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu, as well as an understanding of curriculum making as part of a narrative understanding of experience. Within this context of curriculum making, I examine the intersection of theories related to identity making and community. In particular I explore the importance of narrative coherence and belonging within community as integral to identity making. I also look at the ways in which curriculum making, identity making, and community intersect to reframe conventional views of marginalized space, reimagining it as liminal space in which new configurations of social interaction potentially can emerge. While the theoretical explorations in this dissertation do not represent a definitive theory related to the intersections of curriculum making, identity making, and community, they do act as a launching point for my inquiries into a deeper understanding of the lives and learning experienced by my participants at the edges of their communities.

Later I will explore more fully a narrative sense of curriculum as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1992) that views curriculum in a broad sense as a course of life. This sense of curriculum has been foundational in the development of my research wonders. As I thought

about curriculum from a narrative perspective as a course of life and the various factors that could influence and impact a life course, I wondered especially about the human experience of marginalization. I thought about the ways we are positioned and the ways we position ourselves within the margins of communities, particularly how that positioning might impact identity making and curriculum making. I asked myself what narratives we might tell and retell to shape our understanding of these experiences and to shape our identities.

As I began to wonder about a course of life positioned in the margins or edges of community, I also began to wonder about the ways in which we, as educational researchers, define community. Out of that wondering, a series of questions began to shape my research puzzle: What are the metaphors we use to describe community and our places within it? What significance do those metaphors hold in helping us to understand the experience of living on the edges of community? Is it possible that we might actually define community by its margins or edges? If so, what significance does that hold for the lives and learning that go on in those spaces? What identity making and curriculum making happens in those spaces? How useful is the term marginalization for describing those lives if the experiences there can be viewed as educative in Dewey's (1938) sense of the term? Might we need to re-imagine those spaces from the perspective of the people existing there? Furthermore, I began to wonder about the ways in which the edges of community might be more fluid and shifting, more permeable, than fixed and how those positioned in spaces on the edges of community might move through the borders of communities. How might the fluid nature of communities' borders allow one to be central to community and to exist at the edges simultaneously? How might these wonderings be illuminated or complicated by the stories that individuals tell about their place/space in community? These shaping questions formed the basis for my over-arching research puzzle: What do the narratives of people positioned or positioning themselves on the edges of community reveal about the life and learning that goes on in those spaces and, furthermore, in what ways does a deeper understanding of the life and learning on the edges of community shift our sense of the educative value of those spaces?

### **Curriculum Making as a Course of Life**

My research wonders about life and learning on the edges of community developed out of a narrative understanding of curriculum making as a course of life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2000). In exploring the meaning of curriculum, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) refer to the

*Oxford English Dictionary* definition to highlight a broader understanding of curriculum that reaches beyond the limited sense of curriculum as objectives and content to a sense of curriculum as a course of life. In this expanded understanding of curriculum, the teacher and students live out the curriculum as opposed to deliver and receive it (p. 365). As Clandinin and Connelly stated, “An account of teachers’ and students’ lives over time is the curriculum, although intentionality, objectives and curriculum do play a part in it” (p. 365).

Schwab (1973; 1983) shaped the understanding of curriculum as consisting of four commonplaces: teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu. Although Schwab saw these four curriculum commonplaces as equally important in curriculum making, at the same time he recognized that one or another of the four may require a stronger intentional emphasis in light of the particular, specific circumstances of the curriculum making moment. Schwab (1973) also contended, “The meanings lie as much in what was decided against as in what was decided for. They lie in the reasons for rejection of alternatives as much as in the reasons for preferring those which are preferred” (p. 506). Schwab’s contention that meaning lies as much in what is excluded as it does in what is included caused me to wonder about the lives and learning that happen on the edges of community, in the lives of people who are, to a greater or lesser degree, excluded from a community. What is the relationship of the edges to the centre? In his invitation to attend to what we exclude as much as what we include in curriculum, Schwab also asked us to pay attention to the “nuances of expression in the course of deliberation” (p. 506). In this way, he suggested curriculum making, the process of choosing what or who is in and what or who is out of curriculum, and by extension community, is a complex process.

If we accept Schwab’s premise that the act of inclusion is by its very nature an act of exclusion as well, we can no longer rely on the defense of unintentionality. We may not recognize the full extent of collateral consequences in our choices but we must recognize, at least, that there are collateral consequences – all acts of inclusion are acts of exclusion. At the same time, I wonder if as an individual it is possible to be included and excluded at the same time. What are we included or excluded from? Kliever (1998), in discussing the schooling of children with Down syndrome, suggested that citizenship in community reflects “cultural traditions and the current authority of certain groups. . . who are charged with defining what constitutes *the differences that matter* (emphasis original, p. 15). Who, then, holds the privilege to determine citizenship in a community, to decide which differences matter?

It may be possible to think of our curriculum-making moments as choices that both include and exclude, as Schwab (1973) suggested and, furthermore, that those moments are inherently associated with the creation of community where that creation is a generative, ongoing process – a course, if you will, that reaches no static destination. In its inconclusivity, this dynamic process of curriculum making in community suggests the state of liminality that Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2003) highlighted. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin drew on Kennedy's (2001) definition of liminal space as "the in-between space, the space between what was and what might be, where one engages with future possibilities" (p. 137) to indicate the importance of holding onto the tensions of inconclusivity as one negotiates and renegotiates a curriculum of community that creates simultaneous inclusions and exclusions.

In my career as a special education teacher, I have had the unfortunate experience of hearing colleagues articulate their belief that not all children are capable of learning and, as such, ought to be peripheral to the life and learning that occurs in schools. If I had not had the experience of navigating through a schooling system that started by categorizing particular students as peripheral, I cannot be certain that I would have been drawn to questions of positioning within community and the ways in which individuals counter such positioning. As it is, I have wondered what things are left unspoken in the unchallenged assumptions of inability, pathology, and deficit. What do those silent spaces reveal about us as educators, about me as a teacher and a curriculum maker? What about the infrastructure of dominance, of power and control, and how it plays out in our society, how it determines who is central and who is pushed to the margins, who is valued and who is disposable? Is it possible that these silences and these structures of dominance mask our own sense of inadequacy? In what ways can our understanding of ourselves and of the children we teach be enriched by entering into these tensioned spaces and dwelling in the tension, staying with the tension and seeking to understand it better rather than smoothing it over?

The narratives explored in this dissertation press us to consider the value of educational communities that embrace diversity and difference, that demonstrate in their structure and in their practice the importance of the edges of community to the very definition of community. Kliewer (1998) argued, "...we each, as human beings, possess a unique value that adds to and strengthens the cultural fabric of society" (p. 4). Arguing for a broadened sense of curriculum,



Greene (1993) wrote, “We require curriculum that can help provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become” (p. 220). Likewise, Richardson (2009) argued:

We know that the concept of cultural diversity, as applied to curricula, has meant the subtle reinforcement of the dominant narrative of the nation and the marginalization of minorities. . . .we need some more open imaginary of curriculum that acknowledges cultural difference yet at the same time makes community possible. (p. 78)

Kliewer, Greene, and Richardson were all arguing for a more inclusive understanding of curriculum in which human diversity is more greatly valued. For Kliewer, inclusion was most effectively developed through community, “As children learn to construct meaning together on the foundation of community, mutually valuing relationships become a very real possibility” (p. 134).

When we consider fresh and unique ways of imagining curriculum making that encourages community, deeper understanding through the exploration of narrative becomes a viable and effective methodology as well as a complex, rich theoretical perspective. In fact, Kanu (2006) posited it as a crucial element in curriculum reform, “This imagining of ourselves as a community participating, interpreting ourselves, and creating knowledge together are critical to curriculum reform in a post-colonial context” (p. 214). Indeed, Kanu could have been referring directly to the exploration of identity making and curriculum making on the edge of community through narrative inquiry and poetic expression when she said, “Emancipatory education begins with teachers who possess the capacity to surpass the given in curricular practices and approach things as if they could be different” (p. 219). Imagining a reframing of marginalization to view the edges of community as rich with life and learning that is revealed through the narratives of the people who move through and live in those spaces may be a way to imagine spaces that complicate the metaphor of marginalization to the point of dissolving its expressive effectiveness. As a poet, I understand that when a metaphor breaks down, we are forced to shift our thinking and to imagine new ways to compose the stories of our lives. As the metaphor of marginalization breaks down, perhaps a space will open up for more inclusive configurations of community.

Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2003) referred to a curriculum of diversity developed as disparate people come together in community. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin stated:

The negotiation of a curriculum of diversity is, then, a curriculum that unfolds moment by moment in a particular place with people in relation. How we understand and negotiate a curriculum of diversity is intimately connected with the life stories of each person and the intermingling of storied lives. (pp. 347-348)

As Clandinin and Connelly (1992) explained, “the curriculum is being lived as each learner constructs new meaning and learns to live a new but connected story” (p. 393). In connecting life stories to the negotiation of a curriculum of diversity, Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin made a strong argument for further exploration into the connections between curriculum making, identity making, and community.

Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) identified the exploration of tensions as key to narrative inquiry, particularly with respect to the ways in which familial curriculum making and school curriculum making bump up against each other. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin further identified one purpose of narrative inquiry as showing “something of the ways in which attention to children’s embodied tensions make visible the gaps and silences they experienced in living in these two curriculum-making places” (p. 108). In my own exploration of the narratives shared by the participants in this inquiry, I noticed a common thread demonstrating the tensions created by the dissonance between their familial curriculum making and school curriculum making. Also, as a poet I understand that it is often the gaps or silences that hold the deepest meaning. In fact, poets often use those gaps to convey another layer of meaning. I am drawn to the identification of gaps and silences in the narratives of my participants as significant moments of inquiry, moments or places, spaces, where we might ask not only who/what is not present or spoken but also who/what prevents representation.

### **Identity Making: The Search for Narrative Coherence**

In the conception of curriculum as a course of life, exploring identity making in conjunction with curriculum making becomes critical in understanding better the experiences of people living storied lives on the edges of community. The narrative conceptions of identity encapsulated by the terms *stories to live by* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and *narrative coherence* (Carr, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are useful in developing a theoretical perspective on identity making.

Earlier I talked about Connelly and Clandinin’s (1999) conception of *stories to live by* as a narrative term for identity used to demonstrate the connection between narrative and identity.

When we think of curriculum as a course of life, we begin to understand the intersection between curriculum making and identity making as integrally connected to the narratives of our lives. Clandinin et al. (2006) raised questions about inclusion and its impact on identity making and curriculum making, “we are drawn toward questions of how children and teachers begin to live out the plotline of inclusion in ways that smooth out the multiple and layered ways in which inclusion is a deeply contextual and never-ending process” (p. 88). As I alluded to before and as Clandinin et al. suggested here, the curriculum of our lives moves fluidly through the boundaries that define the compartments of our lives – home, school, work, leisure, family, and strangers. This sense of the fluidity of boundaries is supported by Minh-ha (1989) who stated simply, “Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak” (p. 94).

Dewey (1938) argued for an understanding of experience that is informed by the context of the individual. As Dewey pointed out, “All human experience is ultimately social [in] that it involves contact and communication” (p. 38). The sociality of experience informs identity and impacts the understanding gleaned from experience, as does temporality and place. Dewey also went on to discuss the importance of place as impacting the development of identity and experience. For me, one of Dewey’s most compelling statements is one that connects the temporality of experience to the development of identity and understanding. He stated, “We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything” (p. 49). For Dewey, then, experience makes meaning of identity. Indeed, experience generates identity making.

Aoki (2005c) explored the concept of identity as it meets concepts related to curriculum making both in the planned curriculum of the school setting and in the lived curriculum of human lives. In so doing, Aoki (2005c) suggested an expanded understanding of identity that recognizes its dynamic, fluid nature:

Increasingly, we are called upon to reconsider the privileging of ‘identity as presence’ and to displace it with the notion of ‘identity as effect’ . . . We are being asked to consider identity not so much as *something* already present, but rather as production, in the throes of being constituted as we live in place of difference. (p. 205)

As Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, and Scheiern (2008) stated, “the differences of each individual context matter” (p. 320). Understanding the fluid nature of identity as well as understanding the importance of context to identity making forms a theoretical foundation for focusing on the particulars of an individual’s stories to live by. Not only that, we are compelled to recognize it is only in coming alongside participants, interacting with them in the contexts of their lives over time, that we are able to making meaning of their narratives.

Aoki’s (2005c) description of identity as effect or in process rather than as presence or static is reminiscent of Bhabha’s (1990) conceptions of Third Space. In Richardson’s (2009) reading of Bhabha, Third Space is “an interstitial location of negotiation and hybridity” (p. 289). In his use of the term *interstitial* Richardson drew on an understanding of Bhabha’s Third Space as both a space in between and as a process or the space of time between events. Richardson also recognized the Third Space as a performative site (p. 290) and as a site where “identity represents a series of permeable and continually transgressed borders between Self and Other” (p. 291). Again, Richardson’s understanding of Third Space as it relates to the performative nature of identity echoes Aoki’s suggestion that identity is “not so much some *thing* already present, but rather as production, in the throes of being constituted as we live in place of difference” (p. 205). Aoki (2005b), himself, credited Bhabha’s ideas in the formulation of his own understandings of identity and the tensioned spaces in between the self and other.

Although Aoki and Bhabha referred to the dichotomy of self and other, their explorations of identity indicated that dichotomies are too simple to be useful. As these and other theorists (Dewey, 1938; Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Minh-ha, 1989; Bhabha, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Aoki, 2005b; Ayers, Quinn, Stovall & Scheiern, 2008; Clandinin et al., 2006; Richardson, 2009; Clandinin et al., 2010; Clandinin & Caine, 2013) have suggested, we compose our identities in complex layers of all that surrounds us, all that has come before, and all that is at any particular moment. In thinking about the process of composing identities, it seems that Schwab’s (1973; 1983) conception of curriculum making as acts of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion might also apply to identity making. We might also define ourselves as much by the things we do not say or do as by the things we state or do, like the negative space surrounding a cameo silhouette – identifiable without detail, the shape of who you used to be, who you think you are, or who you wish to become. This is a notion of identity as temporal – dependent on the moment that you observe it. Defining identity by negative space

is like listening for the silence, for what is left unspoken about an identity. This is the silence between stories, the same silence that Clandinin et al. (2006) identified as a pervasive silence in their field texts, a silence that created a “discontinuity in our stories to live by. . . marked by the tensions felt but not expressed as we tried to live a curriculum of lives” (p. 139). Listening for the silences in stories, noticing the gaps, the absences, are all ways of exploring identity making on the edges of community.

In considering identity making and its connection to community, it is useful to consider the process of seeking narrative coherence in the identity making process. Narrative coherence is a phrase used by Carr (1986) to describe the struggle all people face to make sense of their life stories through the telling and retelling of their life narratives. Carr characterized this telling and retelling of life narratives as a constant task to maintain the unity and integrity of personal identity. Clandinin (2013) identified the integral connection between Carr’s concept of narrative coherence and the narrative commonplace<sup>16</sup> of sociality:

Carr points to the larger cultural, social, institutional, and familial narratives that provide narrative contexts, the landscapes of, and for, each life. The cultural, social, institutional, and familial narratives highlight the embeddedness of each individual’s experience in particular contexts, as well as in particular times and places. (p. 40)

These particular narrative contexts, as Clandinin referred to them, constitute the milieu (Schwab, 1973; 1983) or the communities of the individual<sup>17</sup>. Baldwin (2005) asserted, “To make a *world* that can hold us is a universal longing. And we start by organizing a *story* that can hold us” (p. 134). I wonder if seeking narrative coherence through a sense of belonging to a community might be a defining factor in the development of identity, so powerful, in fact, that it has the ability to disrupt the identity making process, even to interrupt it. If so, the search for narrative coherence would be, in its most basic sense, the search for community.

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<sup>16</sup> Connelly and Clandinin (2006) referred to the “three commonplaces of narrative inquiry” as “temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 479). They went on to say:

Just as it was for Schwab in curriculum, the study of any one or a combination of these commonplaces might well take place in some other form of qualitative inquiry. What makes a narrative inquiry is the simultaneous exploration of all three. (p. 479)

<sup>17</sup> My use of the term “communities of the individual” refers to the communities within which an individual finds herself/himself or in which an individual chooses to locate herself/himself. Later, I discuss Lindemann Nelson’s (1995) concepts of found and chosen communities more.

### **Exploring the Edges of Community**

As I thought about the ways in which people are positioned within community, I wondered about the ways in which we might hold back from fully entering into community, the ways in which we might create barriers to community in our own lives. This caused me to further wonder about the experience of living on the edges of community, whether we choose that space, are pushed into it, or some combination of both. At the 2013 Summer Institute on Building Peaceful Communities at the University of Alberta, Joshee talked about the need to see ourselves as an integral part of a community (personal communication, July 4, 2013). She went on to say that viewing ourselves as integral parts of community starts by knowing who is in our community (Joshee, personal communication, July 4, 2013). My earlier work with autobiographical narrative beginnings identified complexities in my early childhood around the concept of community and living on the edges of communities that suggested to me we might play some part in our own positioning within community. Those experiences, which I told and retold in various venues and written inquiries, helped me to understand the importance of building community, connecting within community. It also raised questions for me about how I might begin to see myself as an integral part of community as Joshee suggested was necessary. These wonderings come from my own experiences and caused me to think further about the possible need for proximity of connection and interaction in order to enter into community. Also, I wondered if it was possible to insert ourselves into community in a way that did not recognize the prerequisite of establishing meaningful relationships. In other words, how essential is relationship to community and might that also be connected in some way to a sense of isolation or of being positioned on the edges of community? Dei (2003) contended that student engagement/disengagement shares a causal relationship with the student's identity as a member/non-member of the school community. This understanding of the relationship of belonging to identity making invited me into a deeper exploration of community and how it might be operating to impact the lived curriculum.

Earlier I wondered if it was possible to be included in community and excluded from community simultaneously. I recognized in my own experience moments when I have decided not to join into community. Reflecting on those times, I wondered about what was at work in my own lived curriculum that inhibited me from choosing to enter into community. Was something in my own identity making causing me to live a story of isolation and disconnection? The idea

that I might somehow have agency in my own marginalization created dissonance and tension for me – it caused me to think about the possibility that at least in some instances, we may not merely be the object of disconnection but may in fact be the subject of that positioning, creating our own stories of being at the edges of community for purposes as yet unclear or, as Greene (1993) suggested, creating ourselves “in resistance to objectness” (p. 213).

### **Constructing Communities**

Lindemann Nelson’s ideas about the importance of counterstories to the development of communities of choice have been pivotal in my own emerging ideas around how one might begin to reframe perceptions about marginalized groups and the experiences of their lives in the margins. I briefly explore the characteristics of counterstories within the context of narrative inquiry methodology in Chapter Three; however, Lindemann Nelson’s connection of counterstories to communities of choice is useful here in developing a conception of community.

Lindemann Nelson (1995) recognized the importance of community to identity making and curriculum making. She argued, “Our communities do more than guide us – they constitute us” (p. 28). Furthermore, she identified exclusion from community as fundamentally unjust because “it not only expels whole categories of people from useful participation in social life, it also deprives them of material goods” (p. 29). She went on to distinguish between communities that individuals find themselves in and communities that individuals choose. Lindemann Nelson identified *found communities* as those communities we find ourselves in such as families, our work places, schools and the like. These are communities where we may be recognized as a member to a lesser or greater degree, but are not necessarily communities in which we feel integral or connected. At the same time, it is important to realize that found communities play a crucial role in identity making. Lindemann Nelson stated, “‘found’ communities place us within a particular tradition; they give us a language, a culture, an inheritance, a home” (p. 28). However, found communities typically function from a perspective of influence and authority, re-inscribing patterns of dominance and silencing on the people within them (Lindemann Nelson) and laying the ground work for stratification of the community that positions some members as more central and others as more peripheral.

In contrast to found communities, Lindemann Nelson (1995) drew on Friedman (1989) to develop a theory around the characteristics of communities that form through voluntary association and act to re-centre previously marginalized individuals. Lindemann Nelson called

these voluntary communities *communities of choice* and posited that they typically provide a stronger sense of belonging than found communities for individuals who experience a deficit of belonging. In order to qualify as a community of choice, however, the voluntary community must display particular characteristics that support and nurture the identity of the individual. She drew heavily on Walker (1987; 1993) to describe the five characteristics necessary for a community to be considered a *community of choice*. First, the community must function as a moral space.<sup>18</sup> Second, individuals within that moral space are safe to tell self-defining stories. Furthermore, communities of choice resist the tendency to homogenize difference. She also argued that communities of choice, through the opportunities they allow for retelling retrospective narratives, provide opportunities for reconfiguring the distorted stories of found communities in ways that shift identity. Finally, Lindemann Nelson contended that communities of choice are well-suited for “the moral task of resistance and insubordination” (p. 33). It is the potential for communities of choice to enact shifts in identity and, by extension, social change that interested me. What opportunities, I wondered, do communities of choice provide for the reconfiguration of social structures previously based on power and control, structures that appear to be at the heart of the metaphor of marginalization?

Interestingly, Lindemann Nelson (1995) posited the ability of communities of choice to enact social change within their willingness to compose what she calls *counterstories*. She defined counterstories as narratives that run counter to the dominant narratives of a community. A primary argument put forward by Lindemann Nelson is that, through counterstories that challenge the dominant narratives, groups who have been marginalized can both create new, responsive communities of choice as well as reclaim their positions in and their access to the resources of the dominant community. She also introduced the concept of communities, and the stories they tell, as being nested within other communities. This metaphor of nested communities complicates the metaphor of marginalization that concentrates dominance at the centre of a community with diminishing dominance as one moves from the centre to the edges. When a metaphor breaks down it loses its expressive effectiveness, forcing us to find new ways to think about and to describe experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Lindemann Nelson (1995) defined moral spaces as those spaces “where its members can come together to discern, construct, correct, and celebrate the community’s story” (p. 24). Her use of the term moral in this context does not refer to the morality of the community but rather its self-defining nature that serves to support its members in the composition of their stories to live by.



In my exploration of life and learning on the edges of communities, I have been particularly interested in what counterstories emerged to reconfigure the dominant stories of the found communities of school and family. I have also been interested in what communities of choice were revealed by the narratives of research participants who are perceived or who perceive themselves to be positioned on the edges of found communities. I was curious about what groups people pulled together around themselves to create community, and how the narratives they told about those communities worked to reshape identity in the lives lived on the edges of found communities, communities where people are often positioned as other (Clarke & Murphy, 2015). Also, I wondered about how that space/place on the edges of community opened up opportunities for living and learning that the dominant community<sup>19</sup> did not.

Perhaps most profound for me in my self-reflection was the realization that my own sense of disconnection from community came from focusing my attention on the dominant communities that surrounded me without attending to the communities of choice in which I participated. In my research wonders, I sensed the need to examine more closely the metaphor of marginalization within community and its connection to identity making and curriculum making. I wondered if individuals positioned as marginalized or on the edges of community viewed themselves or positioned themselves as marginalized. What were the stories of connection or disconnection to community that they composed? These wonderings occurred at the juncture of my theoretical perspectives and my methodological choices – in narrative inquiry seeking to understand individual experience takes priority over seeking generalized or essentialized understandings of experience. In narrative inquiry the researcher and the research participants engage in a co-composition of meaning around the research wonders. In my research around community, curriculum making and identity making, I explored alongside my research participants the ways in which they composed their lives from the edges of found communities as well as from the centre of chosen communities, attending to the nested nature of community from Lindemann Nelson's (1995) perspective.

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<sup>19</sup> Lindemann Nelson (1995) distinguished between “a dominant group and groups with less power” (pp. 28-29). My use of the term dominant communities draws on Lindemann Nelson's understanding of a dominant group as, quite often, the communities within which an individual finds herself/himself or her/his found communities.

### **Identity Making, Curriculum Making, and Community**

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggested that identity making is tied strongly to curriculum making. In fact, in their understanding of curriculum as a course of life, curriculum making is viewed as life writing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). When a researcher reflects on the narratives of research participants, the researcher then also engages in an act of life writing or identity making as well as inquiring into significant curriculum making moments in the research participants' as well as her own narratives (Clarke & Murphy, 2015).

During a research retreat some years ago, a group of us planning to do research together met to determine the direction of our inquiry and to build common understandings around identity making and curriculum making. At this research retreat we talked about the spaces between – the spaces between students and teachers, the spaces between students and learning, the spaces between teachers and their goals, ideals or hopes for their students – all these spaces with no discernible points of connection until we started to unpack the contexts surrounding our assumptions. As I entered into the inquiry for this dissertation, I recognized the importance of attending to the spaces in between my initial understandings of identity making and curriculum making. As I stated before, Aoki (2005c) discussed similar spaces in between identities and curriculum conceptions or “what there is between, the between, a site of relations which are not separable from each other” (p. 205). He called these spaces “enuncitatory spaces of difference” and contended that they “are liminal places inhabited often by the colonized minorities, the migrants in a diasporic community whose productive voices are now beginning to come forth” (Aoki, 2005b, p. 308). For Aoki (2005c), to explore this site in between curriculum conceptions or “between curriculum-as-plan and the lived curriculum” (p. 205) was to open up a space in the middle that allowed the voice of the other to speak. Furthermore, Aoki (2005c) contended, “Every multiplicity grows in the middle” (p. 205). In Aoki, I saw the possibility that recognition of difference might open up a space where connection and understanding could begin to develop. I was especially interested in Aoki’s idea about listening to the silent voice of the other as a way to enact performative identity construction, or reconstruction, what narrative inquirers call narrative coherence, within the spaces in between. Aoki (2005c) wrote, “the face of the other is already inscribed in the ‘other’ of ‘the other curriculum’ the lived curriculum” (p. 212). He also asked us to consider the teacher’s role as one of “listen[ing] with care to the voice of the silent

other” (p. 213). This inquiry became an exploration into the tensioned spaces where silent voices spoke and privileged voices chose intentionally to be silent.

Lindemann Nelson (1995) also conceptualized the integral connection between dominant stories and counterstories in a way reminiscent of Aoki’s ideas by stating:

If stories of retrospective definition determine in a present moment what has up until now been morally indeterminate, counterstories take what has (for the moment, at least) been determined, undo it, and reconfigure it with a new moral significance. All dominant stories already contain within them the possibilities for this kind of undoing: it is in the nature of a narrative never to close down completely the avenues for its own subversion. The construction, revision, and reinterpretation that are ongoing in dominant storytelling leave plenty of opportunities for counterstories to weave their way inside. (p. 34)

Both Aoki and Lindemann Nelson described a space not unlike the Third Space referred to by Bhabha (1990), a space in between what is and what could be -- a liminal space.

Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2003) drew on Heilbrun (1999) and Kennedy (2001) to define the characteristics present in a liminal space. Paramount among those characteristics was the sense of liminality as a state of necessary in-betweenness, a space “never designed for permanent occupation” but as a place “between destinies . . . the place where we write our own lines and eventually our own plays” (Huber, Murphy, Clandinin, pp. 101-102). My exploration of identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community became a foray into that liminal space where new variations are imagined of old stories.

In her own journey as a researcher and an activist, Cullis-Suzuki (2007) recognized the importance of narrative to meaning making when she identified stories as instrumental in shifting her perceptions and making her think of an experience or idea in a different way. Along with her shifting perspective, Cullis-Suzuki recognized a concomitant shifting of her identity. For Cullis-Suzuki, this shift happened through listening to the stories around her and through looking at them with fresh eyes. As I considered Cullis-Suzuki’s descriptions of research as a personally transformative process, I began to understand that it is possible not only to see something different as a result of shifting to a narrative perspective but also to see differently.

As I began to explore ideas related to community, curriculum making, and identity making on the edges of community, I began to recognize dissonances within my own current understandings about community, about identity making, even about curriculum making created

by the ambiguity and complexity of this exploration. Part of the work that I have done in my research is to pay attention to these dissonances and to the silences in the stories of those around me, especially the silences related to living on the edges of community. Aoki's (2005c) admonition to listen to the voice of the silent other led me to wonder who the other might be and whether or not that identity as other was as shifting as identity in general seemed to be.

The process of developing a research/theoretical perspective that explored community, curriculum making, and identity making in light of my wonderings about life and learning on the edges of community was complex and complicated. In my wanderings through these ideas, I recognized that I had made choices, as Schwab (1973) suggested, that simultaneously included and excluded ideas in my attempts to shape my questions into a coherent perspective. In some ways, this process was counter-intuitive to the narrative process, which does not seek conclusions but rather seeks a more generative process that keeps the research wonderings open.

I realized over the course of this inquiry that I was holding on to a story of myself as a strong student, one who was capable of conquering the challenge of coherence, both academic and narrative. At the same time, I lived a subtler story, one not completely hidden but one that lurked at the edges of my stories to live by – a story of someone who felt she never quite fit in within the found communities of her life, someone whose own sense of exclusion developed into a desire to understand better the lives and learning that happen on the edges of community. By coming alongside the participants in this inquiry for more than a year, by listening to and trying to understand their stories, I began to imagine a new story for myself, a counterstory, of reconnection and renewal. The strength of liminality, as Heilbrun (1999) pointed out, is that it is a place “where we write our own lines” (pp. 101-102). As I considered my developing identity as a narrative researcher exploring the lives and learning of people on the edges of community, I began also to imagine new ways of being in the world that re-storied myself as a connected, valuable member of a larger community that I moved freely into and through. I came to understand that, ultimately, we do not enter into research in order that things might stay the same. We engage in inquiry in the hope that transformation is possible. If to story my life was to create stories that defined my identity, then to re-story my life might be to pick up the interrupted narratives of my life and continue through tension to re-establish identity. Re-storying, then, might become a *restoring* of identity.

King (2003) wrote, “I find it easier to tell myself the story of my failure” (p. 166). I recognize in King’s statement a truth at the heart of my own narrative. I experienced a sense of disconnect whenever I heard a story of success told about myself. As stories of success rubbed up against all the stories I had told about my own inadequacies, stories of my success required me to reassess my own worth in order to bring about narrative coherence in my life story. In the same way, stories of marginalization have been stories of failure to affirm an individual’s lack of worth to a community (Kliewer, 1998). But if a story of marginalization can become a story of life and learning on the edges of community, how might that shift in perspective alter the experience and impact identity making and curriculum making? I wondered how shifting our stories and telling different stories might invite a shift in our lives or in the lives of the children and youth we taught. I wondered if children, youth, teachers, community members had already discovered ways in which to compose counterstories to the narratives that positioned them on the edges of community. Perhaps, as Brady (2009) suggested, we could begin by looking in a different direction at what was already there, by telling a different story. Oki (1997) wrote, “If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (as cited in King, p. 153). In this inquiry, I unpack the stories of the participants in light of these theoretical perspectives and wonderings.

## CHAPTER 3

### NAVIGATING THE SPACES BETWEEN POET AND SCHOLAR: NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND POETIC EXPRESSION AS METHODOLOGY<sup>20</sup>

#### Methodology: Narrative Inquiry and Poetic Expression

##### Threads

Sometimes you want to stare

at chipped polish on your toenail

without the stir of thoughts into action and repair.

Sometimes you want to hear

your own breath in the night,

your own echo down the hall.

Peace comes in single threads

left to dangle

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<sup>20</sup> Portions of this chapter were previously published as the article Liminal lives: Navigating the spaces between (scholar and poet) in *in education* 20(2) Autumn 2014, pp. 103-120 and in the book chapter Poetic osmosis: Revealing the fluid edges of community through poetic representation in a narrative inquiry of curriculum making and community in *Provoking Curriculum Studies: Strong Poetry and Arts of the Possible in Education* (Clarke & Murphy, 2015).

when even wind is sensitive

to desire. (Clarke, 2015j)<sup>21</sup>

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) stated, “To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomena under study” (p. 477). Pinnegar (2006) also recognized the dual nature of narrative inquiry as both a methodology and a phenomenon of study “that provides insight into human interaction” (p. 176). Narrative inquiry is a methodology that views experience narratively. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) also described narrative inquiry as a methodology that “conceives of schooling as an expression of personal and social narrative history. The questions asked by those who hold a narrative perspective focus on the meaning that specific actions hold in terms of participants’ personal and social history” (p. 109). Furthermore, the narratives that participants share about themselves indicate what they think about themselves as learners and curriculum makers as well as reveal how they perceive themselves to fit within the circle of curricular opportunities provided to their classmates or even within the larger community as a whole (Clandinin et al., 2006; Murphy, 2004).

I recognize myself in the description Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) gave of narrative inquirers as “researchers [who] usually embrace the assumption that the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (p.4). I have always understood my own world through a narrative lens, recognizing innately the narrative nature of experience and seeking to make sense of life experiences in the context of my own life story – what it seemed to be, what it seems to be, what it seems to be becoming. While my research wonderings about life and learning on the edges of community have come into sharper focus over the years, they are an extension of wonderings I have sustained through my own experiences as a child who did not fit in, an adult who struggled to find a place for herself in the world, and an educator who began to awaken to the fundamentally human nature of those experiences. As a teacher working primarily in the area of special education, I observed both lived and told stories of children and adults who felt on the edges of community, people whose experiences of not fitting in seemed at once both varied and profoundly similar. Pinnegar and Daynes posited, “Narrative inquiry begins in



Threads.m4a

<sup>21</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

experience as expressed in lived and told stories” (p. 5). For those of us who slowly awaken to the stories around us, both in our own lives and in the lives of those we are in relationship with, engaging in narrative inquiry as a research methodology is a natural fit with the established rhythms of our wonderings.

Narrative inquiry is also a good fit for me because of my comfort working with words and my background in writing. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) noted “the move to words as data” (p. 3) is a predominant component of narrative inquiry. Because I am a writer and a poet, collecting narratives, exploring experience through narratives, examining and searching for deeper understanding through narratives have all been ongoing passions in both my personal and professional lives. In my doctoral work I sense the convergence of these various identities in my focus on narrative inquiry shaped by the poetic expression of research.

Part of the reason narrative inquiry is so effective at exploring personal experience is because it is a natural way of exploring the world, a way closely connected to individual experience. As a narrative inquirer, my focus is on experience understood by Dewey as grounded in continuity, situation, and interaction (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). For Dewey, (1938) “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p.35). In addition to continuity, Dewey’s understanding of experience also included the notions of situation and interaction. Dewey thought of interaction as the interplay between the social and the personal. However, the understanding of the interplay between the social and the personal cannot be separated from the situation of the experience. In Dewey’s words, “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (p. 43).

Language is part of what identifies us as human -- it is essential to human experience (Baldwin, 2005) and language, itself, is the expression of experience. Baldwin went on to say that story “is not opinion; story is experience” (p. 46). As Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) argued, to incorporate language into the research methodology through narrative inquiry is to give prominence to particular experience, to honour the experience of the individual. By extension, poetic expression of narrative research is the particular emphasized, which is to say that meaning making facilitated by poetic expression relies on a consistent and minute focus on the particular. The narrative nature of experience lends itself to exploration through inquiries that attend to the



particular, to the storied nature of experience, and to methods and methodologies that embrace multiple ways of understanding the world.

King (2003) said, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 153). This is consistent with a narrative inquiry approach to exploring experience. King, like Clandinin and Connelly (2000), suggested that our identities are narratively constructed. What is the truth of who we are? It is in the stories we tell about ourselves, the stories that people tell about us, in the stories we act by, and the stories we tell in our actions. Story becomes the warp and weft of all experience – it weaves its way through every moment. Stories are central to understanding the nuances of human interactions in any context. Additionally, the really powerful stories are the ones that shift our perceptions and invite us to look in different directions from the directions and perspectives we are comfortable with. Furthermore, infusing a narrative inquiry with the poetic expression of research provokes the researcher as well as the reader to draw deeply on personal experience to make sense of the research. The poetic expression of research within a narrative inquiry makes visible the experience of the research as an unfolding experience itself for the participant, the researcher, and the reader.

Clandinin and Caine (2013) wrote that the quality of narrative inquiry is determined by the multiple commitments that we make to the process, in particular “an extensive commitment to writing as a way to inquire” (Richardson, 2003 as referenced in Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 178). Through my explorations of narrative inquiry methodology, I came to realize that the writing I have done daily for years outside of my doctoral research involved the telling and re-telling of experiences using the same methods employed by narrative inquiry methodology. At the time I was unaware that my daily writing reflections constituted a component of narrative inquiry methodology. By immersing myself in a daily practice of writing about experience, I grew comfortable with a narrative way of thinking and reflecting on experience. In many ways, I have been a reflective participant observer all along, composing field texts through my daily writing. Lindemann Nelson (1995) argued, “Our responsibilities, it would seem, extend beyond what we choose to what chooses us: to the people and things that need our care and attention” (p. 36-37). In the same way, narrative inquiry was a natural fit, a methodology that seemed to connect with my already established practice of reflection through writing. Through a daily practice of reflective writing I began to make sense of my own experiences and the experiences of those around me. In referring to the researcher as a participant observer, Clandinin and

Connelly (2000) stated, “Always, for learning to occur, the inquirer in this ambiguous, shifting, participant observation role is meeting difference; allowing difference to challenge assumptions, values, and beliefs; improvising and adapting to the difference; and thereby learning” (p. 9). In the same way, narrative inquiry forces me to engage on a relational level with people and with the stories that they tell.

For me, more than any of the other research methodologies, poetic expression and narrative inquiry share an emphasis on attending to the importance of relationship. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) wrote:

Narrative inquirers, particularly in living studies, are in relationship: negotiating purposes, next steps, outcomes, texts, and all manner of things that go into an inquiry relationship. Inquiry questions and texts are ones in which inquirers give an account of who they are in the inquiry and who they are in relation to participants. (p. 480)

Likewise, Brady (2009) wrote, “poets write *in* and *with* the facts and frameworks of what they see in themselves *in relation to* Others, in particular landscapes, emotional and social situations” (p. xiv). By adopting methodologically the perspective of a narrative inquirer and then using poetic expression to articulate my always-partial understanding, I attended to the importance of bringing myself, my whole self, into relationship with my participants. Engaging in poetic expression of research kept me grounded to who I was and made evident my presence in this inquiry. Engaging in narrative inquiry ensured I stayed connected relationally to my participants and focused on their experiences throughout.

### **Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space**

As I have mentioned, narrative inquirers focus on experience as understood by Dewey. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identified sociality, temporality, and place as the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry “which entail an exploration of temporality (past, present, and future), sociality (the dialectic between inner and outer/the personal and social), and place (the concrete physicality of the place or places in which experiences are lived out and told)” (Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin, 2011, p.12). Dewey (1938) also highlighted the importance of sociality, temporality, and place to curriculum making, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) credited as the foundation of their understanding of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (p. 50). Indeed, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of sociality, temporality, and place constitute the dimensions of experience in narrative inquiry (Huber, personal communication,

July 2, 2013). It is Dewey's understanding of experience grounded in continuity, situation, and interaction that led to Clandinin and Connelly's development of the concept of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

Though narrative inquirers view experience through the lens of the three dimensional narrative inquiry space, we understand as well its grounding in Dewey's (1938) conceptions of experience. For instance, through the commonplace of temporality, narrative inquirers seek to understand experience through the past, present, and future; this is grounded in Dewey's understanding of experience in terms of continuity. Likewise, through the narrative commonplace of sociality, narrative inquirers attend to the dialectic between inner and outer – the personal and the social; this is grounded in Dewey's understanding of experience in terms of interaction. Through the commonplace of place, narrative inquirers pay attention to the concrete physicality of the place or places in which experiences are lived and told; this is grounded in Dewey's understanding of experience in terms of situation. Remaining grounded in Dewey's notions of continuity, interaction, and situation as understood narratively through temporality, sociality and place, narrative inquirers bring a nuanced understanding to their explorations of experience. Methodologically, then, as a narrative inquirer I attended to the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry by engaging in open-ended wondering in this inquiry around temporality, sociality and place as they emerged from my participants' stories.

### **Living, Telling, Retelling, Reliving**

Clandinin (2013) identified *living*, *telling*, *retelling*, and *reliving* as four key terms in narrative inquiry:

The terms – *living*, *telling*, *retelling*, *reliving* – have particular meanings in narrative inquiry. . . . People *live* out stories and *tell* stories of their living. Narrative inquirers come alongside participants . . . And begin to engage in narrative inquiry into our lived and told stories. We call this process of coming alongside participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories *retelling* stories. Because we see that we are changed as we retell our lived and told stories, we may begin to relive our stories. (p. 34)

In narrative inquiry the researcher lives alongside the participants for a sufficiently long time in order to have a better sense of the life being lived, to better understand the continuity of

experience of the participants. The *living, telling, retelling, and reliving* cycle of narrative inquiry requires that a researcher remain focused on experience as expressed through the stories of participants, both lived and told.

In this narrative inquiry, I began by listening to and recording the stories of my participants. This process continued over the course of more than a year in which I met with each participant individually every other week initially and then monthly toward the end of the inquiry to engage in research conversations. As we spent more time together and shared our stories, the participants began to include me in larger and larger pieces of their lives, opening up their lives to me and offering an increasing depth of trust and candour in their sharing. As a researcher engaged in a deep, profound process of sharing stories with my participants, I found it important to our growing relationships to risk more of myself personally and to share more of myself with them in order to remain in relationship with the participants. As they risked more of themselves in the inquiry, I found I was also able to risk more of myself, always balancing my heightened vulnerability with my role as a researcher whose primary ethical responsibility was to assess the vulnerability of participants and work to alleviate risk. I found this process at once both challenging and invigorating. As a result, I have learned more about myself over the span of this inquiry than I expected. I also came to understand the need for vulnerability in the researcher/participant relationship. These personal insights provided an added layer to my meaning making as I unpacked the participants' stories.

### **Stories to Live By**

The term *stories to live by* is a narrative term for identity used by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) to demonstrate the connection between narrative and identity. Connelly and Clandinin stated, "We have used these terms to explore teachers' professional identity on the professional knowledge landscape. We have tried to show that teachers' working lives are shaped by stories and that these stories to live by compose teacher identity" (p. 94). The same idea can be applied to researchers and research participants alike. Our lives are shaped by our stories to live by. Furthermore, our stories to live by compose our identity. By inquiring into research participants' stories to live by, we gain insight into the identities of our research participants. Clandinin et al. (2006) identified stories to live by as, "multiple, fluid, and shifting, continuously composed and recomposed" in moment-to-moment living (p. 9). As I sought to understand the stories my participants told me, I used my understanding of the various kinds of stories to live by to provide

a frame or lens through which to wonder about their stories. Clandinin et al. identified a number of different kinds of stories to live by that one might encounter such as secret stories, cover stories and competing stories, all of which provide useful insight into the analysis of participants' experiences. I review the definitions of the various stories to live by as they emerge in the analysis of participants' stories later in this dissertation.

### **The Importance of Metaphor**

Clandinin and Connelly (1992) drew on the work of Schon (1979) as well as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to assert "metaphors are no mere 'anomalies of language' but are instead expressions of living" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992, p. 369). Clandinin and Connelly went further to assert the importance of metaphor in understanding teacher narratives by stating, "we and other teachers are, in an important sense, living our images and metaphors" (p. 369).

Through the study of literature and in my work as a narrative inquirer, I came to appreciate the ways in which metaphors shift our meaning making and open up possibilities for understanding that would not exist otherwise. For narrative inquirers the analysis of metaphors that emerge from narratives is an essential component of unpacking those narratives to achieve a deeper understanding of how they inform participants' identities. Attending to metaphor within the narratives of my participants was an important part of my analysis of their narratives, especially in the ways the metaphors that emerged intersected with their identity making, curriculum making, and their positioning within community. Zwicky (1995) postulated:

This may also be thought of as the problem of metaphor: that metaphor's truth, its charge of meaning, depends on the assertion of identity and difference, on erotic coherence and referential strife, on meaning as resonance and meaning revealed through analysis. (p. 53)

As Zwicky suggested, metaphor both reveals and conceals. As narrative inquirers, we must attend both to the ways metaphor reveals meaning and to the ways metaphor conceals meaning.

### **Choosing Poetic Expression of Research**

The metaphorical nature of the way we live out experience makes poetic expression of research especially effective as a tool to gain insight into participants' experiences. As a methodology, the discipline of poetic inquiry relies heavily on the examination of metaphor to deepen our understandings of narrative moments (Richardson, 1993). By applying aspects of poetic inquiry to the analysis of research expressed poetically, I was able to reach a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. Because I identify primarily as a narrative

inquirer, I do not consider my methodology to be poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry is a developing methodology employing a wide variety of poetic techniques to make meaning in research. While my use of poetic expression of research could be viewed as a version of poetic inquiry, I identify as a poet-researcher engaged in narrative inquiry.

Other narrative inquirers have used poetry within their research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2006; Huber, Murphy & Clandinin, 2011; Young et al., 2012). My methods of poetic expression are unique in that they engage a poetic creative process to express my meaning making of participants' narratives. In reflecting on and writing about participants' narratives, I shift constantly between my identity as a poet and my identity as researcher. As a result, the poems in this dissertation function as interim research texts while, at the same time, stand independently as poems. I engaged in a rigorous creative process to write them and then engaged in a process of co-composition with participants to ensure the participants supported these expressions of their experiences. Consequently, engaging in poetic expression of research created the space for a creative dialogue between myself and the participants. In the silences created by the poetic expression of narratives, participants were able to share forward-looking stories that further deepened our understandings of their experiences. It was metaphor within the poetic expression of research that provided the gaps or silences in expression that further invited wondering and meaning making during the member-checking process of this inquiry.

Poetry as a form inherently draws on metaphor as a sense-making device. Brady (2009) referencing Gibbs (1994) pointed out that metaphor is a commonly employed method of understanding experience, both in poetics and in research. Brady stated, "There is more than one way to see things, to say things, and therefore to know things, each inviting different points of entry into the research equation" (p. xiii). Bateson (1994) also emphasized complexity and ambiguity as necessary components of learning. She talked about the human propensity for metaphor and how a metaphor can both obscure and create deeper understanding. Through the poetic expression of meaning making in this narrative inquiry, metaphor created multiple layers of understanding and provided multiple entry points into the experiences described. At the same time, the use of metaphor through poetic expression also placed a deeper demand on the reader to reach back into individual experience to make sense of the experiences described here. In this way, metaphor through poetic expression transformed this dissertation into a living document not only co-composed by the researcher and participants but also recomposed by the readers as they

bring their own understandings and interpretations to the poems shared as part of the inquiry into the participants' experiences.

### **Inconclusivity: The Open-Ended Question**

Poetic expression and narrative inquiry share a dedication to keeping the moment of wondering open and inconclusive (Brady, 2009; Pinnegar, 2006). Pinnegar identified wondering as a tool for narrative research that expands “the more traditional idea of research findings” (p. 178) by inviting and enabling “readers to reimagine the story being lived, connect the story to their own lived experience in schools [and] rethink research, schools, and lives” (p. 179). The idea of engaging in wonderings as opposed to answering a research question or questions is unique to the methodology of narrative inquiry. Through open-ended wondering “the researcher holds the reader in a narrative space of inconclusivity” (p. 179). Narrative inquiry does not seek a definitive answer but rather moves fluidly through a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to better understand the nuances of lived experience.

Holding a space of inconclusivity open was necessary when examining the storied lives of the research participants as they interacted in relation to each other and to me. As researchers, we are *in medias res* – in the middle of things. As I mentioned when discussing the relational aspect of narrative inquiry, narrative inquirers enter the living, evolving stories of our research participants while they are already in progress and we exit those lived experiences in the middle as well. We move back and forth between our own experience of the research, or what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the experience of the experience of research, and the storied lives of our research participants. Accepting, allowing, even embracing that space of in-between-ness (Aoki, 2005c; 2005b) opens up the opportunity for deeper understanding of particulars of our research participants, and our own, lived curriculum.

Jackson (1992) made the point that all understanding, regardless of how thorough or thoughtful, is at best partial. We are never through with the study of curriculum making or identity making or life and learning on the edges of community because we can never fully grasp every aspect of these experiences; being grounded in experience, human endeavors by, their very nature, are complex and difficult to encapsulate. Narrative inquiry as a methodology understands that individuals defy definition despite our best efforts. The tension created by the inconclusivity of attending to the particular rubs up against reductionist and formalistic notions of how research ought to reach some all-encompassing conclusion (Clandinin and Connelly,

2000). Jackson asked us to consider a benefit arising from tension, “Might it be that some of the conflict. . . constitutes a healthy tension that needs to be preserved and managed rather than eliminated or resolved” (p.4)? Jackson understood that people are more complex than any single view can articulate. He recognized the tension that all of us hold within us as individuals who lean a particular way or face a particular direction but who also hear voices from all directions and consider, even incorporate, those ideas into our own thinking. Adichie (2009) warned us of the danger of the single story and its propensity to create stereotypes that are incomplete. Adichie said, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign but stories can also be used to empower and humanize.” Jackson and Adichie reminded me during this inquiry of the importance of holding the inquiry open and resisting the urge to generalize our emerging understanding.

As a narrative inquirer shaping her understanding through the poetic expression of research, I thought about how to hold the uncertainty, the inconclusivity, of multiple stories close as I wrote. I wondered how to stay with the tension of those moments without giving in to the seemingly ingrained impulse to declare a certainty. Goldberg (2013) said, “[B]ehind our words are no words. We have to know about silence.... And behind our stories are no stories” (p. 130). For me the compelling stories are the stories not told, the stories behind or underneath the stories told, the silences in narrative moments. As a researcher attempting to articulate my emerging understanding, it remained a challenge to allow the silences to resonate with meaning. Poetic expression helped me to allow the silences to speak.

### **Unpacking Narratives To Gain Deeper Understanding**

Rarely are there neat and tidy endings to our stories. The narratives continue even though we might pause in our reflections. Some moments, for reasons we do not always understand or understand immediately, echo through our lives long after the moment is a memory being told and retold as part of our personal mythology<sup>22</sup>. We dwell in the spaces between our narratives, in the interstitial process of becoming that is ever ongoing. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) said, “we need to consider the voices heard and the voices not heard” (p. 147). This reminds me of Schwab’s (1973; 1983) contention that curriculum making is as much about what we leave out as

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<sup>22</sup> My use of the term personal mythology is meant to evoke the narrative inquiry cycle in which narratives are lived, told, retold, and relived in an ongoing, shifting process. Personal narratives, the stories a person tells and lives by, create a kind of mythology of identity which is neither fixed nor static. Like mythology, a person’s identity is ever-evolving as one continues to engage in meaning making through the telling and retelling of her/his stories.



it is about what we include. Clandinin and Connelly suggested, “Our silences, both those we choose and those of which we are unaware, are also considerations of voice in our research texts” (p. 147). This became particularly important as I considered notions of positioning within communities. Often I wondered about who had the agency to ask questions, what voices carried the privilege of speaking and who distributed that privilege? Who decided who was allowed to speak and who could not speak? In narrative inquiry, the researcher negotiates with the participants the voices shared in the research text in a co-construction of understanding. As I listened to the transcripts of my participants’ stories, as I retold those stories and wrote about the meaning I made of their stories, I continually sought the input of my participants. Together we determined what stories would be told as well as how they would be told. In this way we sought an egalitarian co-construction of meaning in a community of shared understanding. The negotiation of these shared understandings was, itself, fascinating and might constitute the foundation for further inquiries into community.

### **Retelling Through Poetry**

The living, telling, retelling, and reliving cycle (Clandinin, 2013) are foundational to narrative inquiry. I would like to draw attention to the unique relationship between retelling narratives and poetic expression of research. In her personal memoirs, the New Zealand writer and poet Janet Frame (2008) recognized the power of retelling to transform the significance of the stories we tell and the stories told about us:

From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of air and light, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth. (p.3)

Frame articulated here a sentiment that also lies at the heart of narrative inquiry – understanding emerges from the telling and retelling of narratives. Frame understood how such retellings are, by their nature, a “mixture of fact and truths” (p.8). As I evoked earlier in my use of the term personal mythology, identity shifts and changes as individuals gain deeper insight through the telling and retelling of personal narratives. As narrative inquirers we also understand this and, as a result, we are interested in the significance of the stories told, the ways in which they illuminate the identity of the research participants and/or our own understandings of ourselves as well as the contexts in which we find ourselves. We do not seek a singular truth but rather a

deeper understanding of particular experience. As educational researchers engaging in narrative inquiry, we are also interested in the educational significance suggested by particular experience.

The poetic expression of narratives is, in its very form, a retelling of narrative. The inconclusivity inherent in poetic expression as well as the participatory nature of poetic expression invites multiple opportunities for meaning making. It encourages movement away from the single story to multiple stories. Poetry is meant to be read and re-read. Through narrative inquiry, that intention is repeated through unpacking the poetic expression to uncover the metaphorical and literal meanings as well as how those meanings bump up against the experiences of the researcher, the participants, and the readers. The unpacking of poetic expressions of research is not meant to express a single story of how to interpret experience but rather invites a participatory exploration of multiple stories of interpretation. We recognize that poetry, as a genre, encourages multiple analysis. The same can be true of prose, including academic prose, but there is a convention in understanding the meanings of academic prose to be static. Unpacking poetic expressions of research surfaces that convention and subverts it. Poetic expression in this dissertation grew out of the telling of narratives and was, by its nature, a retelling. Essentially, poetic expression entered the cycle of living, telling, retelling, and reliving at the retelling stage and created a motivation to pause and examine more thoroughly the narratives of my research participants as well as our meaning making of their experiences for opportunities of multiple meaning making and the embracing of inconclusivity.

### **My Critical Connection to Poetic Expression**

Because I am a poet, I appreciate and recognize the efficacy of poetic expression of research both to complicate our thinking and to suggest rich meaning making in our inquiries. Poetic expression is a tool of language that can be used in multiple ways to communicate across a variety of disciplines. Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009) stated poetry “can be used as an analytical or reflexive approach as well as a representational form in qualitative work. It is a form of inquiry” (p. 3). Poetic expression is critical to my sense-making process. My purpose in employing poetic expression in this dissertation is not purely aesthetic, although there is an aesthetic aspect to the poems. In crafting the poems, I did play with the nuances of language to highlight the complexity of the medium. I employed poetic devices such as metaphor and analogy to engage the reader. I was also interested in the quality of the poetry included. I strove

to write what might be considered good poetry<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, in order to remain narrative in nature, my poetic expression within this dissertation has experience at its core. I used poetry as a medium to explain my thought processes in unpacking the narratives, which allowed me to suggest alternative understandings of experiences and the lived curriculum (Aoki, 2005a; 2005b; 2005c) that arose from those experiences.

Poetic expression of research within narrative inquiry demands a reframing, a shifting, of expectations when it appears in the context of educational research. To engage in poetic expression in educational research is to make prominent a form of expression not typically associated with educational research, a form that itself has been positioned on the edges of the educational research community. In this sense, employing poetic expression was a way for the methodology of my research to mirror my research wonders around life and learning on the edges of community. In the same way that I hoped my research would challenge our assumptions about the way we position or are positioned in communities, the methodology I employ also challenges our assumptions about what is legitimate and what is not legitimate in terms of educational research. Furthermore, the use of poetic expression in narrative inquiry allowed for the development of research texts which examined the position of the researcher and recognized the researcher's identity as both researcher and participant in relational narrative inquiry. As Richardson (1993) pointed out, "Poetry is thus a *practical* and *powerful* means for reconstitution of worlds" (pp. 704-705). Through poetic expression in my dissertation, I have in essence reconstituted my identity as both a poet and a scholar. Those identities are no longer separate. Through this inquiry and the writing of this dissertation I have recomposed myself as a poet-researcher. Like my participants, I demonstrated through poetry that there is not and that there ought not to be a single story of what it is to be a scholar.

Poetic expression of field texts, interim research texts, and research texts<sup>24</sup> combines the primary focus of poetic expression to evoke emotion with the primary focus of narrative inquiry

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<sup>23</sup> Butler-Kisber (2010) referenced the work of Richardson (2000) and Finley (2003), among others, to suggest that poetic inquirers are aware of the need to attend to the quality of poetry within research. Bulter-Kisber referred to the "architectural dimensions of a poem" (p. 97), which include concreteness, emotion, ambiguity, and associative logic (pp. 97-98). The process I used to test the quality of the poems created for this dissertation included reviewing the poems for qualities similar to those Butler-Kisber described,

<sup>24</sup> Clandinin (2013) defined field texts as "our term for *data*... including, for example, filed notes, transcripts of conversations, and artifacts, such as photographs and writings by participants and researchers" (p. 46). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote about interim research texts as "texts situated in the spaces between field texts and final published research texts" (p. 133). Clandinin explained interim research texts as a way for researchers to "continue to engage in relational ways with participants" (p. 47) as they begin the task of analysis of the field texts. Ideally,

to attend to the particular experience. Richardson (1993) identified poetic expression as uniquely capable as a form of exploring the open spaces of inquiry invited by a narrative perspective of research. She stated, “By setting words together in new configurations, the relations created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us hear and see the world in a new dimension” (Richardson, p. 705). As I have mentioned, poetry, by its very nature, invites multiple understandings, multiple interpretations, and ultimately holds open the space of inquiry in inconclusivity – that is, it allows us to continue to inquire both into each research participant’s unfolding course of life and into our own. Poetry engaged in the service of research carries with it the weight of the poet-researcher’s experience and helps us understand more deeply the nuanced layers of that experience (Clarke & Murphy, 2015). Richardson (1993) said:

It is this potential for relating, merging, being a primary presence to ourselves and each other which makes possible the validation of transgressive writing, not for the sake of sinning or thumbing one’s nose at authority, nor for the sake of only and just writing poetry. . . But for the sake of knowing about lived experiences which are unspeakable in the ‘father’s voice,’ the voice of objectivity; flattened worlds. (p. 705)

Richardson’s recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of poetic expression to make a space for multiple understandings of experience echoes Adichie’s (2009) caution that we not flatten experience into a single story. Poetry is not the only way in which a narrative inquirer might express her emerging and multiple understandings and wonders; however, as a poet, it is my preferred form of expression and the one I am most competent at using to articulate my understanding.

### **What Is Poetry?**

What, then, is poetry? As researchers, how can we be sure our poetic expressions of research are poetry? Like any form of art, poetry is effective only in its ability to convey meaning, to pull meaning out of the incomprehensible complexity of life by inviting, sometimes even forcing, unique perspectives previously ignored. Richardson (1993) argued for the use of

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interim research texts are negotiated and even co-composed with the research participants as the researcher and participants determine together how best to create a research text that is both authentic and compelling (Clandinin). Interim research texts, therefore, can often be partial texts that move the ongoing interpretation from field texts to the final research text (Clandinin). Clandinin defined research texts as “traditional academic publications, dissertations, theses, and presentations for academic as well as for non-academic audiences” (p. 50). I utilize these understandings of field texts, interim research texts, and research texts within this dissertation.

poetic representation as an effective means of conveying both the complexity of identity making and the complexity of the form of expression:

Self-Knowledge is reflexive knowledge. Poetic representation reveals the process of self-construction, deferrals and transformations, the reflexive basis of self-knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a meaningful whole. The poem is a whole which makes sense of its parts; and a poem is parts that anticipate, shadow, undergird the whole. That is poems can be experienced simultaneously as both whole and partial; text and subtext. (p. 704)

The form, then, mirrors the content. The complexity of poetry's potential interpretations reflects the complexity of experience. The form invites multiple layers of meaning and understanding, making it extremely useful in conveying, even through its form, the complexity of our research participants' stories to live by. Poetic expression of research is poetry at the very least in the ways in which the form breaks from the conventions of academic prose and invites layered understandings of the research. Furthermore, by choosing a form of representing field texts that emulated the inconclusivity of their interpretation, I continued to move through the fluid boundaries between myself and my research participants, between the experience and the experience of the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Poetry as Performance**

While it is true that a poem must be performed via tone, voice, and nuanced presentation to be fully appreciated, the textural representation of a poem may also act to convey emotions, atmosphere, and multiple understandings. Through the poetic expression of research, I sought to evoke a strong emotional and experiential response from the reader. The poems in this dissertation were written as reflections on past experiences, either of the participants, the researcher, or both. As such, they exemplify Dewey's notion of continuity through their connection both with the past and the future (Clarke & Murphy, 2015). As Clarke and Murphy asserted, "The act of reading invites them [the readers] to lay their own experiences alongside the experience of the poem." As Clarke and Murphy also suggested, another aspect of poetry as a form is that it anticipates a future audience. In this sense, poetic expressions of research reach forward to a future audience who will experience the poem as a performance of the experiences described. In the same way, the act of writing poetic expressions of research is an act of deferred performance or, in narrative terms, a forward looking story of experience.

### **The Importance of Response Communities**

It was important for me that the poetry shared in this dissertation stay true to the purpose of focusing on experience. At the same time, as a published poet I understood the importance of ensuring the poetry expressed here represented my highest abilities as a poet. The poetry must not distract from the stories of experience but rather should elucidate them. As both a scholar and a poet, it was necessary to seek the support of a response community in order to gain multiple perspectives on my writing. Clandinin and Caine (2013) stated, “Response communities are critical elements within inquiry, as they help inquirers recognize how they shape both the experiences of their participants and their research puzzles” (p. 173).

During the course of this inquiry I was fortunate enough to participate in both a narrative response community and two sustained creative writing response communities. The narrative response community that I continue to participate in grew informally out of a doctoral seminar sponsored by the Narrative Research Special Interest Group at the American Educational Research Association conference in Philadelphia in 2014. This narrative response community consistently supported my efforts through the course of my doctoral work. Additionally, I intentionally sought support from two long-standing creative writing response communities for feedback on the poetry presented in this dissertation.

For a long time during the writing of this dissertation, I experienced a split between my creative writing efforts and my academic writing efforts. I struggled to find a way to transfer the writing processes I used in my creative writing to my academic writing. This feeling of disconnection or division was one of the underlying motivations for exploring the use of poetry within my research. In order to find a way to move my academic writing forward, I needed to find a way to integrate my creative writing into my academic efforts. In writing my dissertation, it felt personally inauthentic to set poetry aside as a form of expression. It felt as though I were denying an essential part of my ontological perspective in pursuit of a methodologically acceptable format. I knew that denying an essential part of myself within my academic writing would be in conflict with narrative inquiry’s insistence that the researcher locate herself within the research. In order to explore and discover who I was within this inquiry, I needed to bring poetic expression back into the work I was doing. As I did, I noticed I began to develop a richer understanding of both myself within the research and of my participants’ experiences.

As I considered my renewed sense of connection as I made meaning of my research through poetic expression within my dissertation, I began to wonder if it might be possible to explore some of my academic writing, in particular the poems generated for this dissertation, with my creative writing response communities. I knew the participants in my creative writing response communities were intelligent, thoughtful writers who were capable of exploring questions deeply. I also knew from experience in those communities that they would be able to provide specific feedback on the poems themselves and their effectiveness as poems separate from the research. I decided to explore the usefulness of engaging other poets in supporting my poetic expression within my research.

### **Academic Border Crossing: Attending to the Poet and the Scholar**

#### How Does It Happen

that no one who knows him now  
knows he has six children?  
How do years go by without  
some small phrase, an aside  
to indicate  
other lives connect  
to his, through blood,  
through family, through  
ten, fifteen, eighteen years  
they lived together  
when others learned  
from him  
how not to cry  
how to welcome  
exhaustion  
how to reject  
excuses?

How can entire lives shape themselves around  
his thoughts  
his words  
the constant presence  
of his disapproval  
until they couldn't see  
where they began and he ended?

How can no one who knows him now  
not know he has six children  
or even just this one

who gives her life  
to find he  
considers her so inconsequential  
no one who knows him (now)  
knows she is alive,  
that she breathes  
and hopes  
and wakes in the night  
fighting  
what it means  
to be the daughter  
of a man who forgets  
(does he forget?)  
that he is a father? (Clarke, 2015b)<sup>25</sup>

The poem *How Does It Happen* was written as a reflective interim research text written in response to conversations shared with one of my participants about the lasting impact of familial curriculum making on identity making. I wrote the poem to express, in part, the emotions associated with a sense of not belonging in my found community of family. As I worked with this poem through the revision process, it shifted in its importance from an interim research text to a research text in its own right. The process I used to explore and develop this poem within the context of this inquiry shaped the process by which all of the poems within this dissertation were developed. The process I engaged in around these poems with my response communities shaped the way in which this dissertation developed and became an important piece of my methodology.

Initially, I took the poem *How Does It Happen* (Clarke, 2015b) to one of my creative writing response communities. I provided each person there with a copy of the poem and explained that it was a poem from my dissertation. I asked them to attend to two specific things in their feedback on the poem. First, I asked them to consider the following questions as they read and listened to me read the poem: What did they get or understand from the poem? What threads stood out for them? How were each of them making sense of the poem? Second, I asked them to attend to the quality of the poem's crafting and to suggest ways in which I might improve the poem as a creative expression, as a poem both inside and outside of research



How Does it Happen.m4a

<sup>25</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



considerations. I found the response community's feedback extremely valuable. They were able to identify the metaphors and images in the poem that stood out for them as well as the major threads of the poem. It was valuable to engage the creative energy of a poetic response group as it gave me a strong sense of how people might make meaning from the poem. Their detailed responses to the poem provided a foundation for my own editing of the poem, moving it from an interim research text to a research text. In addition, these poets helped me to see where the structure and form of the poem enhanced the opportunities for meaning making and where the structure and form detracted from those opportunities. Through this exchange of thoughtful response, I began to see where the poem was working as a strong poetic expression of research and where it was falling short. Because of this ongoing process, I was able to provide stronger examples of poetic expression within my research. While the methods for eliciting feedback varied at times from the one described here, both my academic response community and my creative response communities helped me to ensure the poems in this dissertation met a high literary standard as well as functioned as strong poetic expressions of research.

As the above example demonstrates, poetic expression has the potential to be a powerful expression of both interim research texts and research texts. Creating poems as interim research texts served two purposes: it demonstrated a method for bridging the space between field texts and final research texts creating an interim research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and it provided a rich potential for analysis of field texts through poetic expression (Richardson, 2003, as cited in Clarke & Murphy, 2015, p. 32). "As an interim research text, its purpose is to illuminate the layers of experience that have been observed in the field texts and to suggest directions that our interpretations might take" (Clarke & Murphy, 2015, p. 32). In this dissertation, however, the poems created initially as interim research texts take on expressions of the research themselves to provide multiple opportunities for interpretation. In this way, the poems transform into research texts and become poetic expressions of research.

Within a narrative inquiry, it is not enough simply to present a poetic expression of research. The researcher must also unpack the poetic expression expanding on the experiences expressed in the interim research text of the poem in order to move the interim research text toward the final research text. At the same time, poems can also be considered research texts that express an understanding of experience while inviting multiple interpretations of that experience. In this dissertation, I use poetic expression of research both as interim research texts

and research texts. I also unpack those poems from the perspectives of narrative inquiry in order to enhance our understanding of the participants' experiences.

### **Designing a Narrative Inquiry into Life and Learning on the Edges of Community**

Understanding, then, the efficacy of representing research poetically, how does one begin to collect the field notes that evolve into the interim research texts and finally the research text? Narrative research into the lives lived at the margins or on the edges of communities had the potential to provide opportunities to put faces to the people so commonly positioned as marginalized. My perspective, then, was to enter into relational research with people who were able to talk about not only their experiences on the edges of communities but also people who were willing to share the full breadth of their experiences in community – their life, their learning, their understanding of their lives expressed narratively. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identified several key considerations to keep in mind when designing a narrative inquiry. The design of this study of life and learning on the edges of community attended to those key considerations.

### **Imagining the Life Space of the Narrative Inquiry**

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) contended the narrative inquirer must begin by imagining the lifespace of the narrative inquiry as an ever shifting space in which experience exists along three continuums: temporal, personal, and existential. These make up the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space mentioned in Chapter Two. As Connelly and Clandinin averred, “To plan a narrative inquiry is to plan to be self-consciously aware of everything happening within that space” (p. 481). To that end, I engaged in a narrative inquiry with five participants who identified as being positioned on the edges of community from a variety of perspectives. I was interested in talking to people positioned on the margins of their communities by perceived difference due to cognitive function, sociality, sexual identity and/or academic programming. I established relationships with participants through my professional and personal networks. I was acquainted with two of the participants before the inquiry. The other three were either associated with one of the participants or were referred to me by a colleague. I purposefully engaged participants whose experiences would allow them to speak not only about their experiences in schools but also in the communities surrounding them. I met regularly with each of the five participants individually over the course of more than a year recording and transcribing our conversations. These comprised the field texts for this inquiry.

### **Moving From Methodology to Method**

In order to attend to the living, telling, retelling and reliving of participants' narratives, I was interested in participants who were able to share memories of experiences and describe their current experiences. This underscored Dewey's (1938) concept of continuity, that all experience is connected to experience that came before and experience that is yet to come. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlighted the necessity for field texts to be routinely and rigorously kept as well as being richly detailed. With that in mind, I collected field texts through regular conversations with participants occurring generally every other week in settings comfortable for the individual participants. Sometimes I met in a participant's home. Sometimes we met in a coffee shop or at the University. Occasionally, I was invited to meet with a participant at their workplace. My interactions alongside participants were more frequent at the beginning of the inquiry and tapered off toward the end of the inquiry as I moved from meeting with participants to writing about their experiences. I did not formally interview participants. Although I did ask spontaneous questions to explore further the experiences shared by the participants, generally we engaged in open-ended conversations. I recorded these conversations, transcribed them, and analyzed them from a narrative inquiry perspective.

A significant amount of analysis occurred during the transcription of research conversation recordings. I found that it was extremely valuable in terms of identifying common threads across the participants' stories to transcribe the recordings myself. I kept a detailed field journal in which I reflected on my conversations with and observations of participants. I also made a note of my initial impressions of our transcribed conversations in the field journal as well, referring back to those notes often in the writing of interim research texts and the dissertation. Other field texts consisted of letters, emails, poems, and documents, as well as other personal artifacts shared by the participants. As I moved into the concentrated writing of this dissertation, I continued to meet with participants individually to member-check what I had written. This process of co-composition ensured that the participants were comfortable with the ways in which they were represented within the research text.

### **Locating Myself Within the Narrative Inquiry**

In the tableau of my own experience I hold several facets of knowing that overlap and influence each other as I bring my focus onto a particular exploration or inquiry. I live within Pinnegar and Daynes' (2007) blurred genres of knowing. Even as I engaged in the

unpacking of the participants' experiences, it was impossible for me to divorce my wonderings from the creative work I did with poetry or the professional work I did in my job as a leader for a local teachers' association. In the same way that I approach identity as a complex and ongoing process, it was within a context of uncertainty and disjointed identity that I inquired into myself as a curriculum maker in order to provide a context for my identity as a researcher. I also employed poetic expressions of research to highlight the liminal nature of my identity as a researcher within the inquiry (Clarke, 2014b). Poetic expression of research

within a narrative inquiry is a rigorous and effective means of articulating the researcher's location while, at the same time, recognizing how the shifting nature of identity requires a revisiting of the researcher's perspective to remain connected to the ways in which the narrative inquiry continuously reshapes the researcher's understandings. (Clarke, p. 104)

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) highlighted the importance of designing a narrative inquiry in which the researchers "deliberately imagine themselves as part of the inquiry" (p. 482). In this narrative inquiry I attended to the personal and relational connections between the participants' experiences and my own experiences to keep myself clearly present in the inquiry as both a researcher and as a researcher-participant.

In this inquiry I was interested in examining the connections between a personal sense of being on the edges of community and a desire for narrative coherence by combining both narrative inquiry and poetic expression of research. This required an examination of my own narrative beginnings to explore identity making and curriculum making from the perspective of those living and learning on the edges of community. In addition, I laid the insights gleaned from my own autobiographical beginnings alongside the narratives of participants to explore how my personal understanding of life and learning on the edge of community was altered or shaped by the relational research I engaged in with participants. By choosing poetry as a form of expression, I signaled that I thought of myself as a poet and that poetic expression was a legitimate tool for engaging in narrative analysis of field texts. I developed a narrative inquiry method using poetic expression that explored my own positioning as both a participant within the research and as the researcher whose role it was to facilitate the research experience.

I am the composite of the experiences I have had and the identities, disparate or otherwise, that have arisen out of them. I must bring them all to any moment of inquiry. "My

research is situated in my understanding of my experience” (Clarke, 2014b, p. 104). Narrative inquiry infused with poetic expression as a methodology suited my sometimes fragmented identity as a researcher and allowed me to integrate my other selves as well as to engage in inquiry that recognized the full inventory of my experiences and identities. Even the inquiry influences the inquiry, which is to say that as a researcher and as research participants there is both the experience and “the experience of the experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 289) or, as Baldwin (2005) put it, “in writing we live life twice: once in the experience, and again in recording and reflecting upon our experience” (p. 43). As I stated in an earlier article, “In my focus on retelling through poetry and the narrative unpacking of that poetry, I engage in a reliving of those experiences, as does the reader. I retell, and thus, relive my own experiences of exclusion, isolation, and perceived marginalization” (Clarke, 2014b, p. 104). A narrative inquiry methodology infused with poetic expression invited me to be who I am, to acknowledge who I am in my observations and analysis, and to make who I am a legitimate part of the process. Without an awareness of myself as a poet, I could not begin to understand myself as a teacher or as a curriculum maker, let alone as a researcher. Indeed, the act of writing is an act of reflection that shapes a way of being (Murphy, personal communication, February, 2012). Poetic expression within narrative inquiry, then, made my acts of interpretation visible. Additionally, I grew to understand that the use of poetic expression of research “allows us to speak differently about experience” (Clarke & Murphy, 2015, p. 31).

### **Relational Ethics and Narrative Inquiry**

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identified the connection between relational ethics and narrative inquiry as one of the key considerations when designing a narrative inquiry. In attending to relational ethics, I began by following the University of Saskatchewan’s research ethics process to acquire approval to conduct research with human participants. In addition to that process, I attended to the relational aspect of narrative inquiry on an ongoing basis as I engaged with my research participants over the course of this inquiry. Attending to the relational aspect of narrative inquiry meant that I constantly recognized my responsibility not to cause harm to my participants (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I also constantly kept in mind that I had to strike a balance between the need to protect my participants from harm and the necessity of my research texts to “speak of how we lived and told our stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, p. 174) within the narrative inquiry. Maintaining this balance required a heightened awareness of

the relational aspect of narrative inquiry as well as an ongoing recognition of my own place within the study.

Clandinin and Caine (2013) stated:

In narrative inquiry we are attentive to what it means to live as researchers in relationships, to live in collaborative ways in which we can co-compose and negotiate the living, retelling, telling, and retelling of stories. It is important to understand narrative inquiry spaces as spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants: spaces that are always marked by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care.” (p. 169)

Rather than imagining ourselves as standing apart from the research we do and from the research participants with whom we share these moments, narrative inquiry as well as the use of poetic expression, ask us to attend to our experiences and to recognize they become part of the relational research we engage in the same way that we become part of that research experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the idea that “we are in the parade we presume to study” (p. 81). Clandinin and Connelly further suggested creating and/or collecting field texts is the action that allows the researcher to stay in close relationship with our research participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) suggested that the relational research engendered by narrative inquiry invites researchers and participants both to listen and to tell their stories together, creating a “changing organism composed of multiple nested stories interacting and changing over time” (p. 161). In this way, researchers and participants both come to understand the interconnectedness of their stories, their experiences, and the possibility for deeper understanding of the interwoven nature of experiences (Clarke & Murphy, 2015). In narrative inquiry we see a shift from the individual researcher creating research texts to a co-composition between researcher and researcher-participants that attends closely to relational ethics.

Narrative inquiry invited me to live in relationship with my research participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recognized, “relationship is at the heart of thinking narratively” (p. 189). They also understood that relationships are paramount in any inquiry that proposes examining experience:

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and

we as researchers are in relation to participants. . . It is people in relation studying with people in relation. (p. 189)

Narrative inquiry asks us to study *with* people. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) shared this view, highlighting “the attention to relationships among participants” as one of the four shifts in perspective, or as they call it, turns, that researchers experience as they engage in narrative inquiry (p.3). The relational ethics of narrative inquiry helped me to understand that it is only through relationship with my research participants that I could approach deep understanding of their experiences and the narratives they shared about those experiences. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded me of the necessity of striking a balance between our ethical responsibilities to ourselves and our ethical responsibilities to others in the retelling of stories. Poetic expression helped me to approach that balance through its “ability concomitantly to subvert expectations and to expand understanding” (Clarke & Murphy, 2015, p. 31).

### **Viewing Difference Differently: The Importance of Focusing on the Edges**

Currently, living in the margins is portrayed almost exclusively as a negative consequence of life within a dominant community with little focus on the people who live these lives (Lindemann Nelson, 1995). Are people positioned in the margins aware of their marginalization? Do they view themselves as positioned in the margins? How do the experiences of people positioned in the margins reflect the dominant narrative of marginalization? Might there be another way of viewing the life and learning that goes on in these spaces? Bateson (1994) asked us to consider “It is perhaps because we have not learned to recognize and respect existing order in unfamiliar forms that we are frightened of social change, unwilling to support and work with the forms that peoples find for themselves” (p. 221). As I engaged in this narrative inquiry, I wondered what forms of communities people who have been positioned on the edges of community might have developed to support their life and learning. I wondered how I might attend differently to the lives of people positioned on the edges of communities and how attending differently might effect change in educational practice. Clandinin and Caine (2013) stated, “neither researchers nor participants walk away from the inquiry unchanged” (p. 170). As I drew this inquiry to a close and negotiated an exit, however partial, I was moved by the ways in which I, personally and professionally, had been transformed by this experience. I view difference differently than I did before this inquiry and I wonder now how my participants’ perspectives might also have shifted.

Greene (1993) identified marginalization and exclusion as a “pestilence in our time” (p. 215) and called on teachers to act as “healers, if not saints” (p. 215) in their support of children. As I approached this doctoral work, I felt it was important to re-examine our assumptions of life and learning on the edges of community so that we might better understand how best to support children, both from within the education system and from without. Greene stated, “We require curriculum that can help provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become” (p. 220). This inquiry confirmed for me that curricular reform to enhance inclusion begins by exploring the narratives that people positioned on the edges of community tell about their life and learning in those spaces. In particular, what counterstories have they developed to support their life and learning? Lindemann Nelson (1995) argued that counterstories can be the catalyst for resistance and appropriate insubordination that not only unravels the dominant story but begins to introduce change. By examining experience on the edges of community through poetic expression within a narrative inquiry, I sought to achieve what Butler-Kisber (2005) suggested was possible – the recognition of unconscious connections and threads emerging from the edges of community that help us to understand ourselves better and to become better teachers and researchers.

For years I have been interested in the experiences of people living on the edges of community. My interest stemmed primarily from my own experiences living on the edge of the muskeg, which turned out not to be the edge of the muskeg at all but rather the heart of the muskeg and, oddly enough, the heart of my own identity making. What, I wondered, do others make of this experience of living on the edges of community? How do they story themselves in relation to how they position or are positioned in the world? In my research, both literally and figuratively, I dwelt in the margins of my participants’ lives. I listened from the edges. I watched from the edges. I wrote from the edges. Even in my reflections on our interactions, our conversations, I hovered in the margins of their lives.

I read the transcripts of our conversations and I quite literally wrote my notes in the margins of those transcripts. In his poem *Marginalia*, Billy Collins (1998) wrote:

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own  
and reached for a pen if only to show  
we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages;  
we pressed a thought into the wayside,  
planted an impression along the verge. (pp. 14-16)



As I began to plant my own impressions along the verge of these participants' stories, of their lives, I was struck by an urge to remove myself entirely, give my readers only the participants' stories in their words devoid of my impressions and interpretations. Yet, even the selection of stories presented in this dissertation represented a seizing of the white perimeter, as Collins puts it. I left my impression on this work simply by doing it. I could not pretend now that I had not for months been scribbling away in the margins of my participants' lives. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) said narrative inquirers live alongside their participants in order to understand not only the stories told but also what is not said and not done. These pages, my thoughts, my interpretations and analysis, are most appropriately thought of as the marginalia to the participants' larger stories that can only ever be told partially here.

### **The Participants: The People Who Shared Their Stories**

Over the next five chapters, you will meet the participants in this inquiry. I would like to provide a brief introduction to each participant here. More detailed descriptions of each participant and how they came to be a part of this inquiry appear in the following five chapters. Although their stories and connections often overlapped, the participants each provide the focus for an individual chapter.

#### **Rodriguez**

Rodriguez was a young man in his late twenties. He was referred to me by his mother who was a friend of mine. His mother, Luanne, also became a participant in this inquiry. She thought Rodriguez would be ideal for this study because he was visually impaired and, according to Luanne, had experienced marginalization throughout his schooling and beyond. Rodriguez lost his sight when he was in Grade Four as a result of the procedures and chemotherapy required to treat a brain tumor. At the time that we met, Rodriguez's cancer had been in remission for twenty years. He was self-employed as a reflexologist and was about to begin a course in massage therapy. He was also an accomplished hip-hop musician and DJ. He had just started dating his girlfriend, who would become his wife a year later.

When Rodriguez was younger, he attended a small K to 12 school about twenty minutes outside of a medium-sized western Canadian city. His mother was a teacher at the school. During his high school years, Rodriguez transferred to a city school. His parents were required to drive him to and from school each day. He told me he transferred to the city high school in order to find a place that could accommodate his visual impairment more effectively and that

could offer him more opportunities. We spoke often of his experiences at both schools. It was clear from the stories Rodriguez told me that the city high school was a comfortable space for him where he met and made many lifelong friends.

Shortly after the completion of the research and during the final drafts of this dissertation, Rodriguez's cancer returned. In March of 2016 he was diagnosed with an untreatable brain tumor. He chose to pursue alternative treatments and moved into his parents' home with his wife. His wife and parents, joined by his best friends, attended to his needs during those months. Sadly, Rodriguez passed away on July 3, 2016.

### **Luanne**

Luanne was a member of my poetry response group. For many years we had shared and discussed our creative writing. When I began to look for possible research participants for this inquiry, Luanne suggested her son, Rodriguez. I asked Rodriguez if there was an adult of significance in his life who could add additional layers to his stories. He suggested his mother, Luanne. She agreed to become a participant and entered the inquiry shortly after Rodriguez.

As mentioned earlier, Luanne was an elementary teacher in a K to 12 school about twenty minutes outside of a medium-sized western Canadian city. When we began our research conversations for this inquiry, she had taught in the same school and in the same assignment as a division one teacher and teacher-librarian for several years. Prior to that assignment she had spent several years as a special education teacher, which provided her with a strong understanding of the ways in which her schooling system supported students with disabilities. Both her son and her daughter attended the school at which she taught. During our conversations, she often detailed the tensions that arose for her when her personal life and her professional life bumped up against each other.

Luanne was a highly creative individual who wrote poetry and short fiction. She also facilitated the extracurricular drama program in her school for many years. Luanne talked often of how her love for supporting the youth who participated in drama helped her to sustain herself as a teacher. She also spoke often of her close relationships with her children and husband and the ways in which their lives were coloured by her son's illness and subsequent visual impairment.

### **Liam**

Liam was a young man in his early twenties. He was Luanne's former student. She referred him to me as a potential participant for the inquiry when another participant dropped out. Liam lived in a small town twenty minutes outside of a medium-sized western Canadian city. At the time that we met, Liam was completing his first year of university in the city. He commuted each day from the small town where he lived, preferring to stay there rather than move into the city. As the son of a local public official, Liam was strongly connected within the community of his small town. He worked at a restaurant in the town as well as volunteered at the school as a drama coach.

During his earlier years, Liam participated in the extracurricular drama program at his school. He was also heavily involved in student government, becoming the president of the student body during his Grade Twelve year. Liam described himself as a pivotal member of a small but close group of friends who, at the time of this inquiry, had just begun to move away from the small town where they grew up together. He had a girlfriend he had been dating since high school as well as a close connection to another young woman he described as his best friend. Liam spoke often of his family and his friends.

### **Brooke**

Brooke was a young woman educated as a teacher and employed by a local community centre supporting youth and allies who identified as gender and/or romantically diverse. Brooke was referred to me by a teacher colleague who thought she would be able to refer me to potential participants who identified as gender diverse. Although none of the participants Brooke referred became participants, Brooke herself joined the inquiry as a participant supporting youth positioned on the edges of community. Shortly after joining the inquiry, Brooke left her position at the community centre and began to explore alternative career options. Brooke had spent many years supporting people from diverse backgrounds and identified strongly with her role as an ally to people who were gender and/or romantically diverse. She spoke of her connections to those communities as well as the tensions that arose from perceptions of her own gender and romantic identification. She had a strong background in critical feminist theory and navigated the discourse of critical theory with ease.

### **Jesse**

Jesse was a seasoned teacher entering her eighteenth year at the time of this inquiry. Her primary assignment was as a classroom teacher to youth identified by the school division as at

risk of leaving school early. I became acquainted with Jesse through an education graduate course. She expressed interest in my inquiry and entered as a participant shortly after I the inquiry began.

In addition to being a teacher, Jesse was also a parent in a blended family with six children and one grandchild. Her stories of school often drew on her familial experiences. She often spoke of the ways in which her teaching practices were influenced by her parenting. Though Jesse clearly distinguished between her role as a teacher and her role as a parent, she brought the same degree of commitment to each role.

## CHAPTER 4

### RODRIGUEZ: A WHOLE OTHER GAME

#### Exploring Metaphor to Understand Identity

##### A Whole Other Game

I can't see  
the way you see  
but I can tell            you and I see  
something different.  
Yeah! I've always done things differently,  
for sure, made interesting things happen.  
I say, Don't worry 'bout the details. They take care of themselves.  
Part counter culture, part revolutionary  
part type            image or mentality,    I still apply

for a bunch of jobs,  
smoke pot and learn  
about justice. Joni Mitchell said  
justice is just  
ice    but  
not being accepted, trying  
different things here and there  
with nothing quite working out, well  
that moves you, that pushes you, that  
impacts you. So I'm thinkin', Man, alright!  
So this doesn't work.  
I'm gonna make my own rules.  
I'm gonna do whatever I want.

Sometimes, what you want is  
what they won't let you have  
and what they think  
is the barrier against you,

tenuous questions about disability,  
rights and legitimate lie-  
ability.

So, you're not interested in me.  
I'm just a political case.  
None of you want to touch that  
because I'm also out there, out-  
spoken, anti-establishment, pro-  
marijuana, like  
the profile, the profile  
you're seeing on paper,  
tells you everything  
you need to know,  
like somebody who's going to  
ask questions, like  
somebody who's going to  
cause trouble.  
It's not going to look good  
if you have this guy working  
for you. It's too complicated.  
Who's the blind guy now?

You haven't seen any other ways  
so you think your way is the only way.  
Go ahead! Call me a *go nowhere Sunset Trailer Park kid*.  
I'll take that ride. Whoa!  
What a trip!

I never was a part of your school      wasn't  
involved, wasn't integrated      was essentially      isolated  
and  
in terms of my many educational experiences  
which are deeply tied to those social experiences  
I just wanted something  
different      wanted  
to play music      wanted      something  
more.

It all stems from not fitting in  
so I became interested in alternative activities  
alternative groups  
and I became  
part of them.  
Living here I'm just like  
in my neighborhood. This is my neighborhood.

I know everyone  
from business owners to all the street people too,  
you know? There are powerful people everywhere, in all cohorts.  
Even Ozzie, the homeless guy, knows  
who his friends are  
and holds us close.

My interests impact my experience  
who I let in, who I shut out  
each group different  
so on and so forth and so  
if I was a mainstream thinker  
in mainstream groups like sports,  
this and that *type* of person well  
all *those* groups wouldn't be so accepting of diversity  
and the different things  
I'm interested in  
so I associate with musicians and artists –  
people who make their own rules  
who create different experiences.  
Yeah! I've been accepted in those groups.

You know, some people want their vanilla cake with chocolate icing  
for the rest of their lives. They want no change, they want no nothing  
but I'm lookin' well, not so much looking as

open

to new experiences, new ideas,  
different kinds of people,  
all sorts of people.  
Yeah!

You don't see  
the way I see  
but can't you tell?  
I'm a whole other game. (Clarke, 2014a)<sup>26</sup>

Rodriguez once told me, "Memory is a reconstructive process" (Rodriguez, research conversation, June 19, 2014). His phrase has echoed through my reflective moments as I've

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<sup>26</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



sought to make sense of the many research conversations we've had. Rodriguez's words reminded me that we make meaning of experience as we reflect on experience. Our retelling of an experience recomposes that experience or, as Rodriguez put it, reconstructs our memory of that experience. As I sought to retell the experiences of the participants in this inquiry, I began to think about the sorting of experience inherent to the retelling of those experiences. How would I determine which details should remain in the retelling and which details should be omitted? In talking to a colleague, I once expressed concern over determining what might be of the most significance among all the research conversations I've recorded. He said, "I'm wondering whether you are asking yourself the right questions... Instead of asking why this is important, maybe you should be asking... how do I tell their story?" (Derek Hutchinson, personal communication, January 4, 2015).<sup>27</sup> I realize it is inevitable that my representation of Rodriguez can only ever be partial and the only real way to make sense of this partiality is to enter into the experiences he shared with me of his own life and the experiences we shared together during the course of this inquiry.

After a quick exchange of texts set up by his mother, I agreed to meet Rodriguez at his apartment. At that time, Rodriguez lived in a third-floor walk-up in an affluent section of a medium-sized western Canadian city. Although the neighborhood was up-scale, with large houses sitting on tree-lined streets with paved driveways and grassy boulevards, the apartment building where Rodriguez lived was dated and had an air of neglect. The security doors functioned through a telephone-intercom system that broke down soon after I began meeting with Rodriguez and remained in a state of disrepair for the remainder of his stay in that apartment.

I remember the first day that I visited Rodriguez there. I pressed the number to ring his apartment. He answered quickly and explained that he would come down and meet me so that I could find his apartment more easily. The stairs were covered in faded, worn carpet with open space between the risers so that it was possible to look up through the stairs to the various floors rising above. I heard the hallway door open above me and looked up to see a young man in his late twenties sprinting down the stairs. His agility on the stairs surprised me and I stepped to one

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<sup>27</sup> Within all of the transcripts cited within this dissertation, ellipses indicate words or phrases from the recorded transcript that have been omitted from the quotation. All parts of this dissertation related to participants were shared with the associated participant (member checked) and approved as an acceptable representation of their shared experiences including quoted transcripts as well as poetic expressions of their experiences.



side, thinking that this was someone else from the building, not the young man I was scheduled to visit. As he rounded the corner, I noticed that his gaze was steadily fixed in front of him and that he used the flat of his palm along the wall on one side and the railing on the other to determine how far he had travelled down each flight of stairs. This was, in fact, Rodriguez and I quickly stuttered out a greeting, concerned that he would not realize I was standing directly in his path.

About a year later, in one of our last research conversations together, I related this story to Rodriguez, laughing with him over my own preconceived ideas about what his mobility levels were likely to be given his visual impairment. I told him how embarrassed I was in those first moments of meeting him on the stairway in his apartment to realize that I carried some deeply rooted misconceptions about people with visual impairments. Before meeting Rodriguez, I had a story of myself as a researcher who understood the ways in which the dominant society positioned people perceived as different on the outside of acceptance, someone who felt deeply the injustice of that positioning and the ways in which it limited the possibilities for those marginalized. In those very first moments, my sense of myself within this research was interrupted, disrupted, as I watched this potential participant, someone with no sight, navigate the stairway with ease and abandon. Clearly, my own perceptions were in need of re-evaluation.

Through my work with Rodriguez and the other participants in this inquiry, I have experienced a growing awareness of the connection between community and identity making. Lindemann Nelson (1995) stated, “Our communities do more than guide us – they constitute us” (p. 28). Furthermore, she identified exclusion from community as fundamentally unjust because “it not only expels whole categories of people from useful participation in social life, it also deprives them of material goods” (p. 29). Likewise, Shields (1999) asserted the link between identity and community as well. In discussing teacher identity in particular, Clandinin et al (2006) asserted, “A teacher’s identity is understood as a unique embodiment of his/her stories to live by – stories shaped by the landscapes past and present in which s/he lives and works” (p. 112). Part of the landscape of people’s identities includes community. We must attend to the connection between identity and community if we are to understand our participants’ experiences.

As I mentioned earlier, Lindemann Nelson (1995) distinguished between communities individuals find themselves in, what she called *found communities*, and communities individuals

choose, or *communities of choice*. Lindemann Nelson argued that found communities play a crucial role in identity making because they “place us within a particular tradition; they give us a language, a culture an inheritance, a home” (p.28). However, she contended found communities typically function from a perspective of influence and authority, re-inscribing patterns of dominance and silencing on the people within them and laying the ground work for stratification of the community that positions some members as more central than other members.

In contrast Lindemann Nelson (1995) posited that communities of choice typically provide a stronger sense of belonging for individuals who experience a deficit of belonging in their found communities. Lindemann Nelson also argued communities of choice, through the opportunities they allow for retelling retrospective narratives, provide opportunities for reconfiguring the distorted stories of found communities in ways that shift identity. Finally, she contended communities of choice are well-suited for “the moral task of resistance and insubordination” (Lindemann Nelson, p.33).

When I considered the experience of Rodriguez and his depiction of himself as “a whole other game” (Rodriguez, research conversation, June 19, 2014), I wondered about the relationship between dominant and non-dominant communities. Even in our language it is difficult to describe the positioning of communities and the purposes that they serve for the individuals who choose them or find themselves within them. Should we call non-dominant communities different? If so, different from what or from whom? Are non-dominant communities disconnected from dominant communities or are they somehow inherently connected to the dominant community so that, in their very existence, they serve to define that community? How could we understand any community, I wondered, without understanding its edges? But where did the edge begin and the centre end? This question echoed through my relationship with Rodriguez.

Perhaps most profound for me in my reflections on the ways in which community has functioned in my own life is the realization that, within my own sense of disconnection, I have often focused on the dominant communities that surrounded me without attending to the communities of choice in which I participated. Interestingly, Lindemann Nelson (1995) introduced the metaphor of nested communities and nested stories as a way to make sense of community outside the metaphor of marginalization. Her metaphor of nested communities and nested stories complicates the metaphor of marginalization that concentrates dominance at the

centre of a community with diminishing concentration as one moves from the centre to the edges. As a poet I understand that when a metaphor breaks down, it loses its expressive effectiveness, forcing us to find new ways to think about and to describe an experience. Lindemann Nelson's conceptualization of community as nested provided another way of thinking about community outside the predominant metaphor of marginalization.

I was drawn to wonder about Lindemann Nelson's (1995) concept of communities as nested one within another, of the co-existence of found communities and communities of choice, that one might belong within a community of choice at the same time as one is pushed to the edges of a found community. In Lindemann Nelson's view, communities of choice, those communities that individuals choose, exist within larger found communities. The co-existence of communities of choice and found communities suggests a counter metaphorical conception to the metaphor of marginalization. In the metaphor of marginalization, dominant communities are always at the centre and fully enfranchised members of the dominant community have full access to the assets of that community as well as to the exercise of power within that community. Furthermore, within the metaphor of marginalization, the more peripheral an individual's positioning to the dominant community, the less access to assets and power that person has. In the metaphor of marginalization, it is not possible to be both marginal and central. The two conceptions of positioning within community in the metaphor of marginalization act in contrast to each other. One is either marginal or dominant. In Lindemann Nelson's conception of found and chosen communities, to be disenfranchised within a found community does not prevent full enfranchisement within a chosen community which, itself, may be nested within the larger found community. The perception of a community as dominant or non-dominant within the metaphor of nested communities decreases in importance as one begins to understand how the building of community becomes an action of the individual. A found community may or may not be a dominant community, depending on the experiences of the individual. A chosen community provides an individual with agency, regardless of whether that chosen community is dominant or non-dominant. Because chosen communities exist through the agency of an individual, that is, through an individual's choice, they are fluid and open to change. The metaphor of nested communities, ones which exist within others, supported my sense of dissonance within the metaphorical conception of marginalization and suggested that perhaps the edges of communities might be more fluid than the metaphor of marginalization allowed.

As I thought about this research I had been a part of for more than a year, I wondered if I would find a way to describe effectively the experiences of my participants, the complex ways in which they had described both belonging and not belonging, of participating in community at the same time that they had experienced being pushed to the edges of community. Lindemann Nelson's (1995) concept of nested communities offered a way to frame the complex relationship between dominant communities and the communities that come alongside them. Attending to the specific experiences of individuals within those communities, whether they are edge communities, nested communities, central or something as yet undefined, gave me a way to make sense of the fluidity of communities. I began to wonder, what were the dominant narratives that Rodriguez's experiences bumped up against and, at times, pushed back against? Attending to the narrative nature of experience, I began to shift my thinking from paying attention to dominant communities or dominant narratives to exploring the nuances of experience both within and outside of power structures. Although sometimes messier than critically analyzing a narrative or narrative exclusively from the perspectives of dominance and power, staying grounded in the experiences of the participants and of the research itself honoured the complexity of their human experiences. With this in mind, I began to wonder how Rodriguez's experiences might pass fluidly through the borders of communities.

Anzaldua (1987) described borders as the dividing lines set up to distinguish between us and them. She argued that border spaces are inhabited by the prohibited and forbidden, "those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (p. 25). For Rodriguez's mother Luanne, Rodriguez had always been "far out" (Luanne, research conversations, September 11, 2014) different, cast out even from the mainstream of the social circle of their small farming community. Certainly, his experiences included being pushed to the edges of the school community into isolation through both physical and emotional exclusion. This exclusion, based only partially on his visual impairment, had been a source of great pain for Luanne. She ached for a life untouched by illness or difference. At the same time, her retelling of her experiences were complicated by her deep love for her family and for her son. Her desire to lead a less traumatic life competed constantly with her fierce loyalty and love for her son, who seemed never to fit into their community, even before he grew ill in Grade Four from a brain tumor and, subsequently lost his sight. As she spoke of her son's resilience in the face of illness

and exclusion, his defiance, his difference, there were undertones in her voice of both pride and shame, satisfaction and regret.

Both Luanne and Rodriguez used the metaphor of life as a game to characterize Rodriguez's positioning within community. During our research conversations, Luanne mentioned many times how Rodriguez never played by the rules set in front of him, how he created his own rules and his own game. Luanne said Rodriguez had been, in his own description, "a whole other game" (Luanne, research conversation, May 21, 2014). He had rejected the paradigm of blindness as a disability or impairment. At the same time, she told me he yearned for acceptance, that he was driven by a need for acceptance. As I listened to Luanne, I tried to fit her descriptions of Rodriguez' experiences into the layered picture of who Rodriguez had described himself to be in our research conversations. Defiance and desire for acceptance seemed to live side by side for Rodriguez in ways almost too complex to capture. I wondered about the idea of trying to capture someone's identity. The concept shifted my thinking into notions of colonization and dominance. Perhaps capturing someone's identity was not a useful way to think about growing into a deeper understanding of who a person was based on their experience. I realized I was thinking in metaphors.

In my reflections throughout this inquiry, I drew on at least two understandings of metaphor that were at the same time distinct and yet also overlapped in ways that created tension without resolution. From a poetic perspective, metaphor provided me with access to sense making that was multivalent, multiply inscribed, liminal, and informing without restricting. Zwicky (2014) talked about metaphor as an ontological perspective. She wrote, "Metaphor is a species of understanding, a form of seeing-as: It has, we might say, flex. We see, simultaneously, similarities and dissimilarities" (p. 4). She went on to write, "Metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another" (p. 6). As a poet, I worked in the spaces in between meaning and expression, those spaces that defied definition and yet existed nonetheless. I noticed these same spaces between meaning and expression in my narrative inquiry work as well. I noticed my thoughts searched for metaphors to explain the experiences into which I inquired. Metaphor, then, gave shape to the shapeless. More than merely a device of poetic discourse, it under scribed language itself, infusing expression with meaning beyond the strict definitions or usage of words. Metaphor was the way we were making sense of our worlds. The importance of attending to metaphor was clear.

I held Zwicky's understanding of metaphor as a species of understanding in tension with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) understanding of metaphor as embodied knowledge. While these two notions of metaphor overlapped, the tension created by their dissonant explanations remained unresolved. I held the tension between these two understandings of metaphor in my work as I tried to unpack the metaphors in my participants' and my own narratives.

What did it mean, then, from these tensioned metaphorical perspectives to capture someone's identity? I was dissatisfied, as usual, with the colonial undertones of the capture metaphor (Kanu, 2006). The colonizing effect of the dominant narrative did not fit with the descriptions that Rodriguez and other participants shared with me of their experiences. I hoped in depicting their experiences I would accomplish something more inclusive, more honouring to the experiences they had and the ways in which those experiences shaped their identities, something other than capturing them on the page.

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) addressed the issue of adequately representing a participant's experience by claiming that "the regulative ideal for inquiry is not to generate an exclusively faithful representation of a reality independent of the knower [but]... to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment" (p. 39). Clandinin and Rosiek further contended, "our representations arise from experience and must return to that experience for their validation" (p. 39). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also asserted the melding of stories between a participant and a researcher created a new story, a collaborative story, of their inquiry. They wrote, "The thing finally written on paper... is a collaborative document; a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant" (p.12). In the same way, my representation of Rodriguez's experiences contained within them a reflection of the relationship that he and I developed over the course of our months inquiring together into questions of identity, community, and positioning within communities.

The representations presented here stand as a new story of experience co-composed by the researcher and participant. They are stories that grew out of our interactions together as well as the experiences told and retold. Our interactions as researcher and participant co-composing new stories of experience together comprises the context of these representations. Dewey (1938) suggested context becomes the truth of a present experience, informing our understanding of narratives as we endeavor to unpack them. Jackson (1992) also supported an emphasis on context by arguing, "all experience is necessarily situational and contextualized, that there is no

privileged position outside of experience from which to achieve a free and independent (i.e., non-contextualized) perspective” (p. 10). Anzaldua (2009c) argued, “One always writes and reads from the place one’s feet are planted, the ground one stands on, one’s particular position, point of view” (p. 172). My retelling of Rodriguez’s experience, which positions this as a research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), was appropriately inscribed with my own experiences prior to our work together as well as my experience of our experiences together. Likewise, these depictions carry the imprint of our negotiation of what would appear in this dissertation and what would not appear.

Brady (2009) pointed out, “all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as a personally-situated sensuous and intellectual being” (p. xi). In layer after layer, like the sphagnum moss covering the muskeg of my youth, in my own writing I explored our experiences, the participants’ and my own, of living on the edges of community. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) stated, “Experience, for the pragmatist, is always more than we can know and represent in a single statement, paragraph, or book. Every representation, therefore, no matter how faithful to that which it tries to depict, involves selective emphasis of our experience” (p. 39). His telling and my subsequent retelling of Rodriguez’s experiences, then, became a triangulated transaction between myself as researcher, Rodriguez as participant, and the future reader who would make their own sense of our representations of these experiences.

### **Call Me Rodriguez: Shaping Identity Through Naming**

#### **Call Me Blind**

Call me visually impaired  
unsighted or differently-abled.  
Call me blind.  
It doesn’t matter.  
Nothing fits  
because I do see  
just not through my eyes anymore.

I see through my lips  
and through my nose  
my hair, my skin.  
I see through my thoughts  
through my heart  
and maybe I always did.  
I can’t remember.

It was too long ago.  
I was too young.  
That's what they say.  
I can't possibly remember.

But I do remember.  
My body remembers.  
My memories remember.  
I have always been  
interrupting expectations  
even the expectations of death.

So, call me what you want  
or call me by my name.  
Either way, I'll answer.  
I am someone  
who answers  
someone  
who speaks.  
This is who  
I have always been. (Clarke, 2015a)<sup>28</sup>

In this inquiry, I asked each participant to choose the pseudonym they preferred.<sup>29</sup> Although we used our actual names in our interactions together, it was an interesting process to watch each participant ponder and pick their own name for this inquiry. I was struck immediately by the choice of Rodriguez, which I understood to be the name of an obscure American folksinger from the 1960's whose music had a deep impact on the movement against Apartheid in South Africa. I had very recently watched the documentary *Searching For Sugarman* and had a strong sense of the folk singer Rodriguez as both unique and extremely talented. On sugarman.org, Segerman (2012) stated:

Rodriguez' music and lyrics had also become a guiding light and inspiration to a generation of South African youth caught up in the Apartheid-era army conscription and subsequent Southern African Border wars. The music and message of 'Cold Fact' had



Call Me Blind.m4a

<sup>28</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

<sup>29</sup> All participant names appearing in this dissertation are pseudonyms including surnames. In order to retain the anonymity of the participant, Rodriguez, I share only the pseudonyms chosen for this inquiry and not those that he has used publicly in his music.



become as important to them as that of Jimi Hendrix to the US troops in Vietnam. (para. 8)

My participant had presumably named himself after someone whose impact had been nearly overlooked and yet had shaped the experiences of a generation to bring about radical political change. I wondered immediately if the connection I was making was the one my participant had intended. During our first research conversation, I asked Rodriguez if he had chosen the name as a reference to the folk singer. He said, “Yeah. I know him. He’s cool... It just seemed like a... not popular name, I suppose... and it’s nothing close to mine” (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). I wondered if Rodriguez’s choice of a name “nothing close to mine” (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014) indicated a concomitant desire to re-story himself, to create for himself a story different from the one he currently lived in which he had the power and agency to be influential and bring about systemic change.

The action of renaming himself was one the participant, Rodriguez, had been familiar with. In the past, as he composed and performed music, he renamed himself many times to create a persona to match his music (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 4, 2014; March 6, 2015). The names he chose for himself and then put out into the public each had elements of the alternative, sometimes referring back to his visual impairment, sometimes suggesting his life on the edges of community while, at the same time, hinting of his sense of empowerment. He told me he named himself in these ways because he “always felt like a character of space and things that are different” (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). I wondered what this might say about his identity and his sense of where he positioned himself within the communities he moved through. I wondered if these names, themselves, were secret stories “told only to others in safe places” or cover stories “told to maintain a sense of continuity with the dominant stories” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 7). Like the folksinger Rodriguez, this participant regularly chose different names for himself that storied himself as different or apart. More than that, he also chose names that suggested he might be subtly influential, even subversive, names that suggested he retained autonomy and agency. Subtly, the name Rodriguez created an association between this participant and a unique, compelling musical history as well as a political movement for those who are familiar with the folksinger.

### **Rodriguez and His Music: Composing Communities of Choice**

Lindemann Nelson (1995) contended “a community requires moral space within it where its members can come together to discern, construct, correct, and celebrate the community’s story” (p. 24). Such moral spaces, according to Lindemann Nelson, encourage strong moral self-definition through stories that are non-authoritarian and non-arbitrary and do not fear difference. In this inquiry, I focused particularly on individuals who positioned themselves or who were positioned at the edges of communities. My participants identified themselves as not entirely fitting into the communities that they found themselves in. I was reminded constantly of the complexity of the participants’ experiences and how metaphors for describing positioning within a community broke down under scrutiny. I realized it was through the participants’ experiences that we could best begin to make sense of community.

Many of Rodriguez’s experiences occurred within the context of music, particularly the music that he composed himself. In examining his compositions, it was possible to get a glimpse of the identity he was in the process of composing for himself as well as the community he positioned himself within. During one of our later research conversations, Rodriguez shared a hip-hop song he had written specifically for this dissertation, which he had come to refer to as our project. Although I do not connect with the violence and illicit behavior often celebrated in the hip-hop genre, I was moved by Rodriguez’s deeply creative expression of personal identity in this song. It highlighted for me how important music had been in Rodriguez’s identity making as well as in his construction of community. For Rodriguez, to inhabit a community of choice composed of musicians was to take up the story of himself as a musician apart from the story of himself as a person with a visual impairment. By storying himself as a hip-hop musician, he created a space for himself within a community in which his self-definition fit within the moral space of the community. In this sense, he became part of the larger story of the hip-hop community.

As the lyrics of his song revealed, Rodriguez was engaged in intense and life-defining curriculum making when he composed music. Through his music, I began to get a sense of who he considered himself to be as well as who he hoped to become.

#### Know My Name

Used to hold back. Now I want it all.

No holes in my pants. Six plus tall.  
Ever see a baller that can't see shit?  
Smokin' wet Mazatlan. Get right blitzed.  
You might have seen the movie with the guy dare devil.  
You might think I am on the same level.  
Hollywood bat can't touch the clock.  
Dare devil ain't even fucked with the rock.  
Might be hard to see what I mean  
when all my dreams are green.

Tell me what you want.  
                    What you want.  
Tell me what you need.  
                    What you need.  
Tell me what you want.  
                    What you want.  
The White Cane.

Use to read Braille. Now I read diamonds.  
Try to keep it cool. Don't like violence.  
Don't need a dog to get myself around  
'cause I got a girl who's down with the sound.  
White Cane rollin' like it's hot down south  
And I'll make a piñata right outta your mouth.  
Not gonna stop 'till I hit the top.  
Got an inner vision up inside, starts with hip-hop.  
Day to day I wanna learn something new.  
Blaze with you. Find the truth.  
Every single dream starts in the mind.  
Living large in the stars. One of a kind.

Tell me what you want.  
                    What you want.  
Tell me what you need.  
                    What you need.  
Tell me what you want.  
                    What you want.  
The White Cane.

Give it up for the White Cane. (Artefact received from Rodriguez, March 6, 2015)<sup>30</sup>

Rodriguez once told me he wanted me to make sure I included “the bad stuff” when I wrote about his experiences (Research conversation, March 6, 2015). When I asked him what he

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<sup>30</sup> The audio file of this song has been withheld in order to protect the anonymity of the participant.

meant by the bad stuff, he just smiled. Early in our conversations, Rodriguez self-identified as being set apart from his found communities of home, school, and childhood neighbors for a variety of reasons. In particular, he identified his interest in becoming a musician with the isolation he felt growing up in a rural community (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). He contended his sense of himself as a musician was fed by his sense of being different:

... a lot of people who are different engage in music. Right? ... And music for people is either an opportunity to create or an opportunity to escape – however, it is a discourse for expression... That’s why it’s so appealing to people. Because people often don’t have discourses or means/methods available to express themselves in the way that they feel necessary or fit. (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014)

Here, Rodriguez connected discourse to belonging, identifying music as a means of fitting in. It was interesting that Rodriguez shaped a dichotomy between creating and escaping, as if those were the only two options. In terms of word usage, create and escape are not typically considered antonyms. It was interesting to me that for Rodriguez, the opposite of escape was to create. I wondered, did the creation of music, then, become an escape for Rodriguez?

The importance of music to Rodriguez’s identity making and curriculum making cannot be over emphasized. Additionally, music had been instrumental in Rodriguez’s connection to communities of choice. He said, “Music is really how I met a lot of friends and circles and groups that I’ve associated with” (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). He also identified music as a method of expression for the purposes of fitting in. Yet, in his own compositions, Rodriguez gravitated toward genres of music that routinely used shocking lyrics such as hip-hop and rap. I wondered if he was finding a way to fit into a particular genre or community of music whose conventions themselves set him apart from the communities in which he grew up. It was as if he had two competing desires – to fit in (to something) and to set himself apart (from something). While Rodriguez was never clear what the something was, as I looked across our conversations together I wondered if the something was community and, at the same time, identity. For Rodriguez, there was a tension he dwelt within in relation to his communities and himself. I wondered if these competing desires to fit in and to set himself apart were desires to exercise control over his participation and positioning within a community.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), identity making is tied strongly to curriculum making. Understood as a course of life, curriculum making, by natural extension, is

viewed as life writing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). As Schwab (1973) suggested, it may be possible to think of our curriculum-making moments as choices that both include and exclude. Furthermore, those moments are inherently associated with the creation of community where that creation is a generative, ongoing process – a course, if you will, that reaches no static destination. In its inconclusivity, this dynamic process of curriculum making in community suggests the state of liminality that Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2003) highlighted. They drew on Kennedy's (2001) definition of liminal space as "the in-between space, the space between what was and what might be, where one engages with future possibilities" (p. 137) to indicate the importance of holding onto the tensions of inconclusivity as one negotiates and renegotiates a curriculum of community that creates simultaneous inclusions and exclusions. For Rodriguez, the act of composing music was an act of curriculum making in which he rewrote stories of identity and belonging within community.

Like the re-naming of himself as White Cane within his song, Rodriguez moved between rejecting the impact of his visual impairment and the inescapable reality of it in his life. In describing his DJ performances, Rodriguez said, "...part of the show is all the sighted people being dazzled by the blind guy pushing all these buttons and turning all these dials and shit, right?" (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). As I listened to Rodriguez talk about the performance of music and being at the centre of attention during his performances, it seemed to me that he was very comfortable drawing the gaze of a crowd of people. It made me wonder if, when he was performing as a DJ, he drew the audience into relationship with him. His performances drew his audiences into relationship with him as he shared his music and his spectacle. The audience's response to Rodriguez was in direct response to the performances he shared. Each performance became a potential site for the creation of community. This suggested his communities were transitory and shifting because he controlled them through his performances. He enacted a discourse of belonging through music. I wondered if the music itself was a discourse that he shared with his audience. In his own words, "ultimately, I want to be my own show" (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). In those moments of chosen community, he sat in the centre, shaping the community around him. His words revealed a connection to music that ran more deeply through his engagement in the creation of music than mere production for profit, "So, like, the real magic occurs in the ground that exists between the sound being created and how the brain is trying to interpret" (Rodriguez, research conversation,

May 7, 2014). Rodriguez identified music as a means of opening up a liminal space between what a person hears and how a person makes sense of what she/he hears. His engagement with his audience as he performed his music invited his listeners to step forward into that liminal space to make sense of the music with him, thus transforming the place they inhabited together during those moments through a shared experience into a knowledge space. His creation of a liminal space for sense making through music echoed his use of music to create community. For Rodriguez, music became both a means of inserting himself into multiple communities in various positions and a mode of expressing himself within those communities.

When I first listened to Rodriguez's song *Know My Name*, I told him that I did not really understand what the lyrics meant. He proceeded to translate the lyrics for me, line by line, both helping me to understand the discourse of hip-hop and helping me to understand his representation of himself within the song. In this shared experience, Rodriguez became the teacher, the knower, while I became the learner. This experience awakened in me a deeper understanding of what it meant to come alongside a research participant and co-compose stories of our shared experiences. As Rodriguez translated the song for me, I realized that he was both the insider, speaking the language of the community, and the outsider, speaking and interpreting from the edges of the community, inviting discourse through difference and the interpretation of difference.

### **Inviting Discourse Through Difference**

#### This Is My Other Life (Luanne)

To love someone who is  
blind is  
you don't know  
do you know anyone  
who is blind  
like this?  
There just isn't anyone  
who is like this  
who is blind  
so how do I describe  
what it is to love  
someone who is blind like this?

To love someone  
who is blind, how do you  
describe it?

It's his brilliance, too  
scary and dangerous  
when thought and perspective are  
different and extreme intelligence  
borders on crazy. We thought  
this was his gift, to be extraordinary  
because something else was taken away  
but who else thinks like this,  
here or anywhere?  
He's outside, he's wild  
set on the edge  
and this other thing  
sets him even further out.

Being a musician  
was all he ever wanted.  
He says we killed that dream  
because we wouldn't let him go.  
It was the right thing to do,  
probably, though  
he could have been  
Jimi Hendrix or Snoop Dog  
whoever.

They labelled him  
Chronically Health Impaired  
and Physically Disabled  
so they could get twice the money  
but they never labelled him  
gifted or verbally advanced.  
There's no money for those disabilities.

He's always been radical,  
highly articulate,  
his way to get  
noticed.  
When you're forced to listen  
there are no distractions.  
He could badger you until  
you didn't know anymore  
what your point was or  
what you believed  
but nobody knew  
what he was talking about.  
You can't shut a guy like that down.  
It kills him.

People think he's eccentric  
and he should eat crap  
'cause that's what he can afford  
but he's damaged  
from the chemo  
and people can think what they want  
but that's why he does  
what he does. For his health  
and he doesn't drink,  
hardly at all.

It's not hard to love somebody  
who's brilliant, who's blind,  
who knows what he thinks  
but we dismiss what we don't know  
push out what we don't understand  
perpetrate seclusion within inclusion.

My neighbor told me  
her son convocated  
and they're throwing him a party.  
I think, we never had a party  
even though a degree hangs on his wall  
honours in sociology,  
crime and justice  
but he says leave it,  
have a party when he gets a job  
but it's been four years  
and still no party.

We knew this a long time ago.  
We are comfortable  
with who he is  
show support for what he tries  
but

I keep it quiet.  
Most people have no idea  
this is my other life. (Clarke, 2015i)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.





In the above poem, I reference Luanne's voice, Rodriguez's mother, as a way to introduce my sense making of Rodriguez's use of discourse through difference. Luanne spoke many times to me about the ways in which her son stood out from what she called the mainstream (Luanne, research conversation, April 22, 2014). She talked about her son with both admiration and a sense of frustration that his life has not unfolded along a path that made her more comfortable. In many of our conversations, she identified difference as a contributing factor in Rodriguez's life experiences (Luanne, research conversation, May 21, 2014). Even Rodriguez described himself as different (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). As the thread of difference reoccurred repeatedly in the research conversations with all of my participants, I wondered what it means to be different. How do we determine difference? I wondered if perceptions of difference, both internal and external, might influence an individual's positioning within community and if they might, also, shift a person's identity.

In discussing the impact of perceived difference on her experiences and her thinking, Lorde (1984) said:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. (p. 120)

Rodriguez's experience as a person with a visual impairment had many parallels with Lorde's description of her own experience. In living alongside Rodriguez and his mother in this inquiry, I noticed how his visual impairment at times seemed to dominate his positioning within communities, defining him as other and pushing him to the edges of those communities. Lorde used the term "other" to describe someone perceived to be an outsider "whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (p. 117). I was reminded of Rodriguez's own reference to himself as "a character of space and things that are different" (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). He went on irreverently to describe his purpose as "bringing the message to planet earth... to the people" (Rodriguez, research conversation, May 7, 2014). In the context of this conversation, Rodriguez playfully identified himself as different, even alien; however, the idea of difference continued to resurface throughout my conversations with him. It seemed more and more evident that notions of difference were integral to his identity and to his position within community.

Lugones (1987) talked about the ways in which we are “world travelers” moving between identities and communities with varying senses of who we are in the various worlds we inhabit. Anzaldua (2009b) also spoke of the ways in which we live “entremundos, between and among worlds” (p. 245). Anzaldua recognized the impact of living between worlds. She spoke of how, as a society, “we are frustrated by those who step over the line, by hybridities and ambiguities, and by what does not fit our expectations” (p. 245). Both Luanne and Rodriguez’s stories of not fitting in reflected Anzaldua’s understanding of society’s response to those who do not follow the rules of self-definition or who step outside of the expectations of their assigned category. Luanne’s depiction of Rodriguez as someone who was not like anyone else or like any of the other blind people she knew (Luanne, research conversation, May 21, 2014) indicated she had a sense of what it meant, or ought to mean, to be a blind person. There was some “mythical norm” (Lorde, 1984, p. 116) against which Luanne measured Rodriguez at the same time that she recognized his uniqueness. How, I wondered, do we determine uniqueness, even as a positive trait, without referring to that which is not unique or rare? Always, in our attempts to define we seemed drawn back into conventional metaphors that relied on comparing categories. Lorde contended, “*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (p. 112, emphasis original). In the same sense, I wondered if we possessed the language to articulate identity and position within community without referring to some mythical norm.

### **Breaking the Rules: A Way To Rise**

#### Rise Up

When you don’t fit the template or ascribed pattern  
instead of forcing yourself into the shoe that doesn’t fit  
essentially, make your own shoe  
with cleats if necessary.

I don’t try to play their game. I don’t follow or fall  
within their rules so I can’t play.  
I make my own game.  
I’m a part of a different game  
when I do what I need to do  
to get what I want.  
I’ve watched lots of people,  
disabled, disadvantaged  
play by the rules  
like there’s one set of rules  
everyone plays by but I see

how those rules (no one plays by) dictate  
who ends up on the bottom  
who is exploited, who has nothing.

I fall into another groove  
a different lifestyle, learning  
new things, doing different things  
creating my own thing  
when things don't work out  
the way I anticipate  
the way I envision  
well then, I do whatever it takes  
to get what I want  
to get what I need.

The reality is  
if I didn't break the rules  
I wouldn't have anything  
or any opportunities

but I don't do anything directly  
or officially to hurt someone  
but some law, some arbitrary law  
I don't worry about.  
It doesn't apply to me.

Breaking the rules has benefited me  
severely, over the years  
'cause I'm smart enough to understand  
the system and never get caught.  
Rules are for the lowest  
common denominator  
and if you don't fit in  
well then, you don't fit in.

Is the disabled person, the rejected person  
likely to claim, likely to grab  
their part, or will he just say  
screw it? I support anybody  
disadvantaged, exploited, disabled  
who does anything  
to get ahead.

Who do you judge?  
The poor person who robs someone?  
The kid who sells drugs

to buy the guitar he loves?  
What is justice, anyway?

I knew I was different  
when kids treated me different  
and even their parents  
pushed me away  
because I was sick  
because I was different  
displaced  
within the power structures of opportunity  
and if you don't fit  
well then, you don't fit.

So, you've got two choices  
turn off, tune out, drop out  
or stand up.  
Like, back in my school  
I had to beat up my number one bully  
even though I don't like violence  
to be left alone because  
punishment is for who they think you are  
not what you do. Real justice  
happens somewhere else.

Like here, friends take care of friends  
and if you push someone around  
his friends will find you  
when you're out walking alone.  
Justice happens somewhere  
outside of the rules. (Clarke, 2015e)<sup>32</sup>

For Rodriguez, being different meant he had been and periodically continued to be the target of cruelty and ridicule. His visual impairment was only one of the characteristics, however, that marked him as different. To the sighted world, Rodriguez's lack of ocular vision positioned him as disabled, somehow less able than those who were sighted. In our conversations, though, it was his intelligence and determination that most significantly set him apart for me. I did see him as unusual and special in his ability to articulate his thoughts and in

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<sup>32</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



Rise Up.m4a

his determination to self-define rather than to be defined. At the same time, I was often unaware of my own tendency to categorize and to compare Rodriguez to some unarticulated norm constructed out of my own experience and understandings.

Rodriguez regularly talked about how laws and rules did not apply to him because he could see the flaws in the social structure and the ways in which it oppressed those viewed as different (Rodriguez, research conversation, June 19, 2014). For Rodriguez, a sense of negotiated morality responsive to the people in the community, a just morality that understood the oppression experienced by those marked as different, was a more legitimate code to follow than imposed morality. For Rodriguez, storying himself as someone to whom the rules of society did not apply was a way to create a counterstory in which he had the autonomy and agency, as well as the intelligence, to determine the rules by which he functioned within community. Rodriguez's counterstory of being a rule-breaker and rule-maker allowed him both to resist the definition of himself as disabled or impaired and to be insubordinate to the restraints of that definition placed on him by his found communities through his own sense of strong moral self-definition (Lindemann Nelson, 1995). Rodriguez's counterstory of justice happening somewhere outside the rules reminded me that justice always happens in a moral relationship between an individual and society. Justice, like other experience, is contextual. Rodriguez' stories demonstrated he agreed with a contextual understanding of experience.

The narratives Rodriguez shared over the course of this inquiry were rich with insight and thought provoking. As I considered the ways in which he allowed me to enter into his life and to share in his experiences, I was prompted again to wonder about the ways in which his own perspectives might have shifted as a result of our conversations together. Some of the things he said over our research conversations continued to resonate through my wonderings.

Music is a discourse.

Justice happens somewhere outside the rules.

Every single dream starts in the mind.

Memory is a reconstructive process. (Rodriguez, research conversations, April 24, 2014 to March 6, 2015)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The four lines listed above were pulled from Rodriguez's transcripts over the course of our research conversations together from April 2014 to March 2015. I shaped those phrases into a mini-poem to reflect my emerging awareness of the threads important to Rodriguez's curriculum making and identity making on the edges of community.

His words reminded me of the complexity of experience and of the importance of staying grounded to experience in our inquiries. His stories caused me to ask questions about the ways in which we inscribe ability or disability on identity. They seemed to ask us to recognize that in the messiness of complex human experience, connection does occur, meaning does resonate and ripple out to effect change.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LUANNE: SEEING INTO, THROUGH, AND BEYOND EXPERIENCE**

#### **She Was The Other One**

She [Shauna, Luanne's daughter] wrote a poem in her grade twelve creative writing class and in it was the line "You lost me when I was six" and it was intended for me. The truth of the words overwhelms all other thoughts. My son was diagnosed with a brain tumor when he was nine. After major surgery and three years of chemotherapy during which... he had lost his sight. He was now facing a new world of blindness. His sister was six and in grade one when it all began. In our family's inconceivable pain and struggles through this time, she was lost. Not lost in the physical sense. She was there. She was always there, standing in silence behind the whispers of hushed voices or faces wet with tears. She was the other one, the one no one asked about. The one who understood at six that her world was about to change in ways unimaginable. (Artefact received from Luanne, March 22, 2014)

In March, 2015, I sat in my dining room with Luanne eating dinner. At this point, we had been meeting regularly for research conversations for a year. Usually, we met at her house but that evening we were visiting at my house before beginning to engage in our last, full research conversation. Questions began to emerge as we chatted: Who decided who was in the centre of a community and who wasn't? Is it even possible to determine where the centre ends and the edges begin? What did it mean to be "the other one, the one no one asked about" (Artefact received from Luanne, March 22, 2014)?

Luanne had a lot to say that night about her son, Rodriguez. He was coming back, she said. Not literally but metaphorically. Luanne used metaphors in her narratives a lot, maybe

because she was a poet. She said Rodriguez was still in his own space but now, she insisted, he was not so far out that a person couldn't see him. Her words created a ripple in my thoughts -- not so far out that you couldn't see him. I thought of the metaphor of sight, how in my conversations with Luanne and with Rodriguez sight as a metaphor had been intertwined with metaphors of belonging and exclusion. It made me think again about the metaphor of marginalization with its concentric circles of belonging that dissolve gradually as you move out from the centre until, at some point, belonging no longer describes the individual's experience. It reminded me of walking out into a lake, deeper and deeper. At what point, I wondered, is it possible to say, I am now in deep water? When does shallow become deep? When does belonging become exclusion? Where do the edges begin? I wondered if it was at least in part a matter of context.

### **Shaping Spaces For Familial Curriculum Making**

#### Wait Until the Next Story

There's promises you have to keep  
things you have to do  
and sometimes you put your spirit  
or whatever in a box  
to make sure  
others can have  
what they need.  
At some point  
there might be room  
to come out again.

How do you not shatter?

I go to school and I stay quiet  
while lots of people freak out  
over stupid things.  
You want a problem?  
I'll give you a fucking problem.  
I'll give you my kid for a week,  
my kid who I love and worry about,  
whose friends are dying all around him.  
That's a problem you can't fix.

Wait until the next story.

You just want them to have



a smooth life,  
my gypsies –  
safe. (Clarke, 2016r)<sup>34</sup>

The tensions experienced by Luanne as she negotiated a space in which familial curriculum making and school curriculum making could coexist shaped her practice. Luanne's narratives about her family and her expectations about how the course of her life ought to have unfolded indicated significant tension between the familial curriculum making she composed with her own family and the community curriculum making, including the school curriculum making, that positioned her children, and ultimately her family, on the edges of their social milieu. These experiences of watching her own children being positioned on the edges of their community and of being positioned on the edges herself created in Luanne a desire to open up spaces of inclusion through the school curriculum making in which she was engaged. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) said, "There was, as well, within the familial curriculum making, responsiveness to the questions, wonders, and tensions raised or experienced" (p. 42). In the same way, Luanne accessed her familial curriculum making while in the school curriculum making space. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin highlighted the temporal aspect of familial curriculum making, "woven across. . . familial curriculum making is a temporal aspect that looks to the future" (p. 44). The shift in practice Luanne enacted based on the experiences both within school spaces and outside of school in family and community spaces showed a responsiveness on Luanne's part to compose a forward-looking story in which experiences of exclusion were minimized. This forward-looking story of inclusion can be viewed as a counter-story undermining the dominant school stories that worked to categorize youth in ways that served to devalue the contributions of many to the school community.

As I reflected on Luanne's stories and the stories of the other participants in this inquiry I realized that in multiple spaces and contexts, my participants and the people in their lives bumped up against the expectations of a larger community that did not have a complex understanding of their lives. I thought about Liam, who I wrote about extensively in Chapter Six, as someone who had built a community around himself with varying levels of acceptance by



Wait Until the Next Story.m4a

<sup>34</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

bonding closely with his friends and family, happy to cede a considerable degree of autonomy to achieve that bond. I shared my reflections on the negotiation of acceptance with a colleague who reminded me of a question central to this inquiry – do those we perceive or position as marginalized see themselves as marginalized? Perhaps the response to being positioned on the edges of community is to shape community around ourselves. I wondered, what does it mean to fit in? What does it mean to be autonomous? I wondered if that place we have characterized as marginalized might not be chosen, perhaps not initially but inevitably, because some people find the negotiation of autonomy for acceptance too complex or insurmountable.

### **She Sees (The Other Ones)**

#### She Sees (The Other Ones)

Well, you lose yourself in your kids sometimes  
and I can't settle, not really  
until I know it's right for them.

It's not just one person  
isolated. It affects more than just one.  
He may have been on a different playing field  
but so was she. Always,  
since the day his eyes died,  
her eyes came alive  
and she watched  
everything  
never moved  
never moved  
sat still  
never moved  
never said a word  
but her eyes moved.  
She saw everything.

She watched him  
watched him get shoved, punched  
in the hallway, in front of everyone,  
saw the silence rage, watched  
the rage grow. Young, too young  
she guided him through aisles  
halls, people, shops  
and all the adults  
stared,  
stared at him.  
She watched them stare

stare at him  
and she stared back.

She saw  
Jesus on the streets  
a cigarette turned to ash  
hung from his lips  
homeless, destitute  
desperate  
each a vision of her own  
brother, each repaired  
somehow, with spare parts  
and cast-offs. Cast-offs.

She watched him fight,  
break in, break it in  
break it down  
to all the little steps  
he couldn't see  
she could see  
she watched  
she saw

all the things he couldn't see.

So ask me why I'm still there.  
Ask me why I stay.  
All the things mine didn't get  
I give to them, all the other ones –  
my home, friends, a place to be.  
One of them said to me the other day  
    You know we need some more of us here.  
    We can't just be these few. We can't just have  
    these other ones or just be the other ones.  
The other ones.  
The others.

She told me,  
my daughter told me  
holding on to anger  
is like drinking poison  
and expecting the other guy

to die. (Clarke, 2015g)<sup>35</sup>

The poem *She Sees (The Other Ones)* (Clarke, 2015g) came out of several research conversations with Luanne over the course of this narrative inquiry. The threads of Luanne's conversations dealt heavily with identity and community as experienced from the edge of school communities, home communities, and public spaces. In this poem, Luanne's experiences as a mother are paramount. Often, when talking about her son Rodriguez, she would drift into telling me about her family's experiences and, in particular, the way in which Rodriguez's illness and subsequent blindness impacted her daughter's identity making.<sup>36</sup> She told me stories about her daughter, about the bullying she experienced at school and how that bled into her adult life. She told me about the ways in which her daughter acted as a shield, a protector, for her older brother, Rodriguez, and how she became a witness for his experiences. The experiences told in *She Sees (The Other Ones)* are Luanne's stories of Shawna and Luanne's sense making of those experiences. In this way, they are Luanne's experiences.

Bateson (1994) stated, "All views of the world are acquired and learning a way of seeing the world offers both insight and blindness, usually at the same time" (p. 91). The notion that insight and lack of insight, or blindness as Bateson refers to it, might exist at the same time in our sense making of experience emerged as a common thread in the research conversations of my participants, particularly those of Luanne. The poem *She Sees (The Other Ones)* is an interim research text that brings together the stories Luanne told of her daughter, Shawna. For Luanne, part of her struggle to make sense of her son's experience as a visually impaired person revolved around viewing that experience not only through her own perspective but also through her daughter's perceptions. Many of Luanne's research conversations with me touched on her perceptions of how Rodriguez's illness and subsequent visual impairment impacted his younger sister. In her retelling of her daughter's stories of those experiences, Luanne finds a doorway



She Sees The Other Ones.m4a

<sup>35</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

<sup>36</sup> Shawna was not a participant in this study; however, Luanne's stories of being a mother often included stories of Shawna's experiences as understood by Luanne. I understand these narratives to be Luanne's stories. I created poems based on them and unpacked them as stories told by Luanne describing experiences as understood by Luanne.

into deeper understanding of her own experience as a mother whose children's lives are both impacted by Rodriguez's life-threatening illness and disability.

Using vision as a metaphor for making sense of experience, Luanne moved through what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) called living and telling her stories and her stories of Shawna. In living and telling these stories, she saw more deeply into those experiences. Even her stories of Shawna are stories of Luanne's own experiences. Likewise, as Luanne began to tell her stories again and her stories of Shawna, she also began metaphorically to see through those experiences, to understand them more deeply and thus to achieve deeper insight into the meaning of those experiences. This deeper insight through repeated tellings, or the metaphorical seeing through experience, opened up possibilities for Luanne of seeing beyond those experiences to reliving experience through the composition of new stories to live by.

In Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) conception of living, telling, retelling and reliving, it is not really possible to see beyond experience, *per se*. Those experiences become part of the fabric of our identity and are never really severed from the larger tapestry of our lives. At the same time, the creation of possibilities for new stories to live by composed from the threads of our past experiences does provide forward-looking possibilities that move our new stories beyond the patterns of the old. Clandinin and Connelly said:

This retelling may help us – we authors, our students, readers with a special interest – relive our work as narrative inquirers and move on in ways different from, yet connected to, where we began – retelling connected to telling, reliving connected to living. (p. 187)

As Clandinin and Connelly elucidated, the power of research, of narrative inquiry lies in the retelling, in the possibility of moving both the researcher and the participants forward into the composition of new stories to live by. Clandinin and Connelly said "relationship is at the heart of thinking narratively" (p. 189). Nowhere is this more evident than in the ways that Luanne brings her experience with her own children to her life with her students. Always in her retelling of her experiences, she related those experiences to the students she currently taught and talked about the ways in which her practice had shifted in light of those experiences.

Bateson helped me to understand that we can only see, both literally and metaphorically, that which is within our field of vision. Luanne's attempts to broaden her field of vision by retelling the experiences of her daughter highlighted the complexity of narratives that weave themselves in and out of the narratives of others. In this inquiry, when I share Luanne's stories

of her daughter's experiences, I am cognizant of this complexity and of the difficulty of unpacking those narratives in terms of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. I have also grown to understand that these stories, though they focus on a daughter or a student, are not really the daughter's or the student's stories at all but rather another manifestation of the participants' stories to live by. Luanne's narratives, especially her narratives of Shawna's experiences, demonstrated the ways in which sociality was woven through experience and through identity making for Luanne. Luanne's sociality included her daughter and her sense of her daughter's experiences. As Jackson put it, "there can be no position *outside* interpretation, there is no non-interpretive stance. There are only *ways of looking*, a category that includes *ways of looking at ways of looking*" (p. 20, emphasis original). In this chapter I explore the ways in which Luanne looked into, though, and beyond the experiences of those around her to approach a deeper understanding of her own experiences. By focusing on her "ways of looking at ways of looking" (Jackson, p. 20), I was able to surface ways in which the metaphor of vision or insight versus blindness, functioned as a sense-making mechanism in her stories to live by.

### **She Saw All The Things He Didn't See**

My relationship with the participant Luanne began several years ago. We knew each other as teaching colleagues or rather, I should say that Luanne knew me because of my position as a local association leader in my school division. I did not know her, though, until a mutual friend invited me to join a writers' group she attended. In our initial meeting, we made the connection that we were both teachers, that we both had a background in special education, and that we were both interested in the ways in which the schooling system seemed to be limited in its capacity to support students with diverse needs and diverse identities. Later, when I began my doctorate and started to talk about what I might do in terms of my research, Luanne expressed a desire to be a part of that work. During the period when I was seeking participants for this narrative inquiry, Luanne suggested two possible participants – her son, Rodriguez, and her former student, Liam. Both participants indicated that they wanted Luanne to be the significant adult paired with them in this inquiry.

My initial thinking was that Luanne would play a supportive role in providing another layer to each participant's stories. The stories she shared indeed created a richer picture of each participant's experiences. At the same time, I was surprised by the ways in which her own stories surfaced and gained primacy in our conversations together. Very quickly after beginning

our research conversations, it was clear that Luanne was entering into our conversations as a primary participant in her own right. Each narrative she shared, whether it was in the context of Rodriguez's stories or the context of Liam's stories, emerged as a story about her own experiences. As she spoke, the multiple facets of her identity revealed themselves – mother, teacher, wife, daughter, and poet. Each story, even when it was about the same experience that Rodriguez or Liam had, was about her own experience. While Luanne's stories did provide additional layers or dimensions to both Rodriguez's and Liam's stories, I found, in the end, that I was really listening to Luanne tell me about her own experiences. All of her stories, even the stories she told of other people, were stories of her experience of their experiences. I finally realized Luanne's sharing needed to be honoured with the same primacy as all the other participants.

As this inquiry unfolded, I grew to understand that each participant's experience, regardless of their pathway into the inquiry, was equally important and central, to use the metaphor of marginalization. It occurred to me that reaching this understanding, itself, was ironic. I had imagined an inquiry that at its foundation divided participants into two categories – those who had experiences and those who reflected on experiences. I suppose, as well, that I viewed myself as one of those who reflected on experience, not one who had experiences. I had forgotten that there was not just the experience but also the experience of the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Each of us were equally important to deepening our understanding of identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community. Like Rodriguez's understanding of memory as a reconstructive process, I began to understand my own role as researcher within that process as encompassing experience. My reflections were not separate and apart from the participants' experiences in this inquiry but a part of that experience. As this inquiry unfolded, it became more and more apparent that all the participants were central and I proceeded from that assumption.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued, "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). If we accept Clandinin and Connelly's assertion as well as Lakoff and Johnson's, as narrative inquirers interested in understanding experience, we must attend to the metaphors prevalent in our participants'

expressions of experience. Those metaphors tell us something of not only what they think but also they inform how they act. As Lakoff and Johnson went on to state, “Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” (p. 3). Metaphors, then, are not merely forms of expression but determine the ways in which we embody experience or, as Clandinin and Connelly suggested, how we live out those metaphors. As Luanne retold her experience and the experiences of her own children, her focus returned repeatedly to the ways in which vision metaphorically shaped her perception. It caused me to wonder if her heightened awareness of vision as a metaphor for making sense of experience emerged as a result of her own son’s loss of his eyesight. In Luanne’s research conversations about her children, her students, and her community she often used the metaphor of sightedness to discuss how the people around her saw or failed to see the world.

### **Seeing Into the Experience of Others**

“She saw all the things he didn’t see” (Luanne, research conversation, May 7, 2014). Luanne said this about her daughter, Shawna, Rodriguez’s younger sister, in one of our early research conversations. The idea that Shawna acted as a witness for what Rodriguez couldn’t see was threaded throughout our research conversations. What did it mean to stand as witness for someone who could not see?

In Luanne’s story of her daughter, Shawna witnessed her brother’s exclusion from the found community of his school. She also witnessed multiple occurrences of bullying against Rodriguez by his classmates. As the poem *She Sees (The Other Ones)* indicated:

She watched him  
watched him get shoved, punched  
in the hallway, in front of everyone,  
saw the silence rage, watched  
the rage grow... (Clarke, 2015g)

Three years younger than her brother, Shawna was unable to act against those she witnessed hurting her brother. These details emerged from a story retold by Luanne. They indicated the experience of Shawna witnessing her brother’s exclusion and physical abuse must have been somehow conveyed to Luanne. Luanne never told me how she had heard of these experiences, whether Shawna had told her or whether she had heard from someone else. Upon reflection, I wondered about the process by which these events were retold. What context accompanied their



retelling and what might that context indicate in terms of the impact of these experiences? It is a temptation to speculate that they had a significant impact not only on Rodriguez, who experienced the exclusion and abuse, but also on Shawna who witnessed it, and further on Luanne who shared at some point in the retelling of those events. This gap in the retelling of experience is an example of the ways in which narrative accounts are always partial in nature.

Luanne located the origin of Shawna's subsequent career as an advocate for the homeless and the incarcerated in her role as a witness for her brother, who experienced exclusion and abuse but who could not see that exclusion and abuse approaching. Shawna's adoption of the role of advocate could be seen as providing her with a position within a community of the marginalized nesting within the larger community. In an essay about the connections between identity, alliance-making, and advocacy, Anzaldua (2009a) said, "Being a bridge means being mediator between yourself and your community and white people, lesbians, feminists, white men. You select, consciously or unconsciously, which group to bridge with – or they choose you" (p. 147). In a sense, Shawna's advocacy could be viewed as a bridge between the communities of the homeless and incarcerated and the larger community as a whole. In Luanne's descriptions of Shawna's advocacy, Shawna seemed to move back and forth between these communities fluidly as she recomposed stories of life on the edges of community. Anzaldua (2009b) also posited:

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds... Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. (p. 243).

If we imagine Shawna's choice to advocate for the homeless and incarcerated as growing out of her role as witness to her brother's difficulties on the edges of community, Shawna's recomposition of stories to live by on the edges of community then act as a reliving of the stories of exclusion.

It could be tempting to imagine Luanne's retelling of Shawna's story as it related to her brother's experiences as a happy-ending story, one in which the heroine triumphs over injustice to make up for the injustices done to her family. However, consider Anzaldua's (2009a)

description of what it means to be an advocate, “Often the you that’s the mediator gets lost in the dichotomies, dualities, or contradictions you’re mediating. You have to be flexible yet maintain your ground, or the pull in different directions will dismember you. It’s a tough job; not many people can keep the bridge up” (p. 147). Anzaldua’s descriptions of life in the threshold suggest it is clear that the reliving of such stories is more complex than a happy-ending story might suggest. Indeed, Anzaldua’s description reminded me of Luanne’s characterization of Shawna as someone who was lost and as “the other one, the one no one asked about” (Artefact received from Luanne, March 22, 2014). Luanne synthesized the cause and effect of Shawna’s role as a witness for her visually impaired brother into the motivating factor for Shawna’s career choice. Luanne said, “How did she become like that? Probably to a huge degree from watching him, how he was treated” (Luanne, research conversation, November 6, 2014). For Luanne it is clear: Shawna became an advocate for the homeless and incarcerated to protect and improve the lives of people who were excluded by society in the same way that her brother, Rodriguez, was excluded. Luanne storied Shawna as someone doing for others what she could not do for her brother. Interestingly, this is exactly the way Luanne storied herself – as someone who did for other youth she taught what she was unable to do for her own children (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014). Realizing this helped me understand that Luanne’s stories of Shawna deeply reflected her own stories to live by.

Clandinin (2013) distinguished between thinking about stories and thinking with stories, arguing that “thinking with stories is primarily thinking relationally” (p. 30). Clandinin added:

When we begin to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to be attentive to thinking with stories in multiple ways, toward our stories, toward the other’s stories, toward all the narratives in which we are embedded as well as toward what begins to emerge in our shared lived and told stories. (p. 30)

Luanne’s stories of Shawna are another way of thinking with stories toward the other’s stories. In giving primacy to Luanne’s stories and to Luanne’s stories of Shawna, in reflecting and retelling them in poems, I was able to think with those stories instead of merely about them. During our research conversations, Luanne described Shawna as “the other one” and “the one who watched” (Luanne, research conversation, May 7, 2014). The phrase “the other one” caught my attention and I wondered if Luanne felt her daughter’s identity had been shaped significantly by her experiences as her brother’s watcher.

## Seeing Beyond Experience: Difference Storied as Advocacy

### Shadow Selves

There is a shadow self inside  
the shadow self  
stands inside  
the shadows.

She said  
You have to smile at him.  
I said  
No.

She said  
You have to say hello  
every day.  
You have to turn around  
‘cause you’re running  
while you look the other way  
and you look down  
like a kid.

I said  
I won’t.

She said  
You’ve got to look up  
and you’ve got to say hello.  
You’ve got to  
turn it around.

I said  
I can’t.

She said  
The worst resentment you can have  
is the one you feel justified to keep.

She said  
Holding resentment is like strapping yourself  
to someone with steel binders.  
You have to say  
We’re done now. Okay?  
We’re done.

I said  
nothing.

She said  
Forgiveness is not acceptance.



she a witness for others, seeing what others could not see, Luanne storied her as the strong composer of her future stories to live by.

In addition to identifying her daughter as someone who was able to see what others missed as well as a composer of forward-looking stories, Luanne also identified a former student, Liam, who eventually became a participant in this inquiry, as someone who was able to see what others could not see (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014). A story Luanne told about Liam, however, is relevant to my reflections here about the ways in which Luanne used the metaphor of vision to illuminate her stories to live by. Early in this inquiry, one of the original participants had to cease participating in the inquiry and I approached Luanne to see if she knew of anyone else who might want to participate in the inquiry. In talking about Liam's suitability as a participant for this inquiry, Luanne shared a story of how Liam noticed the hard work of the teachers around him in their school and arranged for each of them to receive public recognition for their efforts. Luanne said

Liam saw things around him that other kids his age wouldn't see. He noticed the teachers would do extra and he'd compliment them on that. Like, he really cares about people.... if somebody's sick, he's concerned.... he's just that kind of kid. He really thinks of you as a person. He's different. Most high school kids only think about themselves.

(Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014)

In this telling, Luanne composed a story of Liam in which his ability to care created deeper insight into the actions of others. He was able to see what others missed because he cared about people in general. His ability to care coupled with his heightened awareness of others caused Luanne to identify Liam as different from other youth his age. Luanne's identification of difference as a defining characteristic of Liam that sets him apart in a positive way caused me to wonder how that story of difference played itself out in Liam's stories to live by.<sup>38</sup>

In Luanne's story of Liam, his ability to see beyond current circumstances of exclusion within his found community of school allowed him to focus his energies on improving conditions for those around him.

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<sup>38</sup> In Chapter Six, I discuss Liam's own identification of difference as a defining factor in the creation of his own chosen community.

[Liam] has a great attitude... but he had kind of a rough time [in high school] and yet... all he can think about is, how can we fix this? How can we make this better? How can we... make the school better? How can we keep working to make things better for people? (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014).

Like Shawna, Liam's ability to see what others missed resulted in a desire to advocate to improve conditions for others. Luanne described Liam as different, unlike "most high school kids" (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014). I found Luanne's consistent association of difference with a deeper or clearer metaphorical insight into the conditions of others interesting. It caused me to wonder about the ways in which we story ourselves or the ways in which we are storied by others and how those stories ripple through our lives. It also made me wonder about what other stories these individuals told about themselves. I wondered what other layers might inform these stories.

In the poem *She Sees (The Other Ones)* I storied Luanne as giving the youth she taught the things she was unable to give to her own children:

So ask me why I'm still there.  
Ask me why I stay.  
All the things mine didn't get  
I give to them, all the other ones –  
my home, friends, a place to be. (Clarke, 2015g)

This poetic expression of Luanne's story came from research conversations we had in which she storied herself as an advocate for students pushed to the edges of her school community. In our research conversations, Luanne said her own children's experiences and the experiences of former students like Liam of exclusion and abuse or bullying were the motivating factors that kept her in the teaching profession (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014). She said, "Am I gonna run away too? I care about those left behind. So that's why I did drama all these years because. . . who are all those kids? Those are the Liams. They're all bright. They're brilliant. They're gorgeous kids.... Nobody thinks they are important" (Luanne, research conversation, September 25, 2014). Here, Luanne storied herself as an advocate for youth who had been excluded from the school communities in which they found themselves. When Luanne and I read this chapter together, Luanne paused in our reflections to note that part of her motivation was not only to act as an advocate for the students pushed to the edges of community but also for herself as a teacher and a person. She said working in this way with students on the

edges of community nurtured her creative side, her sense of herself as a poet and writer, and helped her to make writing come to life in the plays that they produced together (Luanne, research conversation, December 8, 2015). She said, “Yeah, I think you do it a little bit for yourself. You have to. You don’t just do things for somebody else. You have to do a little for yourself, too.” (Luanne, research conversation, December 9, 2015). This way of storying herself as both an advocate for others and also as a person who found the spaces and experiences that nurtured her was a forward-looking story that Luanne composed, a story that moved her beyond the experiences of exclusion and marginalization.

Luanne’s own sense of self as an ally for those pushed to the edges of community was mirrored in the ways in which she storied both Shawna’s and Liam’s experiences. Perhaps Luanne storied Shawna and Liam as advocates because she storied herself as an advocate as well. In a sense, Luanne created a community of identifiable advocates by retelling her experiences and the experiences of Shawna and Liam through the lens of difference. In Luanne’s stories, their difference created a bond that led forward into a future story of advocacy, thus empowering those whose experiences suggested they were powerless. A question that remained unanswered for me, however, was whether or not the youth for whom Luanne advocated actually saw themselves as in need of that advocacy. Did they position themselves as marginalized or see themselves positioned by others as marginalized? Certainly, Liam expressed a sense of difference that set him and his friends apart from his classmates but he also plainly refused to identify as marginalized. I wondered if Luanne’s storying of Shawna and Liam as advocates as a result of their marginalization was a way for her to revision her own experiences of marginalization. If that was the case, it seems clear by extension that what Luanne was engaged in was the creation of a community of advocates whose self-determination defined their forward-looking stories to live by. In a sense, Luanne revisioned the experience of marginalization through her stories of advocacy, suggesting a way those experiences might hold within them the potential for social progress.

Luanne’s stories invited me to think about the ways in which we recognize the educative nature of experience because we look back and reflect on them. It occurred to me that if we had retold these stories in closer proximity to their occurrence, we might not have been able to see the educative potential they held. Luanne’s retelling of experiences of marginalization described the construction of new chosen communities in which she and her children were strong leaders.

Whether these stories reflected how the individuals saw themselves or not does not negate the reframing of the concept of marginalization that occurred over the course of these stories. Rather than conceptualizing the edges of communities as spaces where individuals experienced a devaluing of their importance to community, Luanne restoried those spaces as ones that provided opportunities for leadership. Luanne imagined within her retelling of experience a space where those experiences were transformed into educative experiences that moved her and her children forward.

### **Retelling Experience: Seeing Into, Through, and Beyond Marginalization**

The poems *She Sees (The Other Ones)* and *Shadow Selves* take up the metaphor of sight or vision articulated so often in Luanne's narratives. Like the title of this chapter, Luanne's stories of Shawna are about the ways in which she made sense of her brother's experiences as a visually impaired person, of how she saw into those experiences. Luanne's stories of Shawna also demonstrated how Luanne understood Shawna to be seeing through those experiences to a larger issue or a deeper meaning. Additionally, Luanne's narrative of the ways in which her daughter had taught her to see or interpret experience differently demonstrated how Luanne storied both herself and Shawna as having tried to see beyond the experiences they had. Shawna's decision to pursue a career in social justice as an adult can be viewed as a way in which she was able to see metaphorically beyond the obstacles placed in her brother's path to work for a greater degree of justice for people she viewed as similar to her brother in terms of their disenfranchisement to the benefits of the dominant society (Lindeman Nelson, 1995). Likewise, Luanne's stories of Liam demonstrated her sense of the transformative potential of experience, how experience can create space for new stories to live by to emerge. In many ways, Luanne's stories of seeing into, through, and beyond experience elucidated the common thread of how one might compose a narrative of the self out of one's positioning within community.



## CHAPTER 6

### LIAM: THE GEOGRAPHY OF BELONGING

#### Mapping a Geography of Belonging

##### The Second Son

Taking care of everyone again  
a pattern emerges. I don't accomplish

anything but I have to get things done  
so I don't have time to worry  
so I don't get used to it.

I bend over backward but it seems  
not the right thing to do.

Like a thunderstorm, it starts  
the crackle in the air  
before the rain.

I feel it so often I'm used to it,  
taking care of everything, again.

I bend over, backward  
to learn how to hide  
this generational pattern

but I don't like being away from home.  
Just a little bit longer, then.

It will be okay. (Clarke, 2016l)<sup>39</sup>

Liam was a participant who I came alongside as a researcher through his associations with the participant Luanne. Luanne was Liam's high school teacher and it was Luanne who suggested Liam for this inquiry as a person who she considered to be both strongly connected to community while simultaneously moving through the edges of community. When I first met Liam, he had only graduated two years earlier from Crocus School and was attending university in a nearby city. He spoke openly about himself, his family, and his friends, sharing stories of his life in Crocus and well as his experiences in Crocus School. While his stories were many and varied, the thread of place quickly became evident in all of his stories. Very early in our conversations, I began to wonder about the importance of place in Liam's identity making and curriculum making.

As I considered Liam's connections to his hometown and to his friends and family, I was drawn to wonder again and again about the importance of place in those connections. Basso (1996) said,

In modern landscapes everywhere, people persist in asking, "What happened here?" The answers they supply... should not be taken lightly, for what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of a society.... (p. 7)

Like Greenwood (2013) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I noticed the importance of place within Liam's stories of community and identity, the specific geography of where those stories occurred. At the same time, I grew aware of a metaphorical geography at play in Liam's stories, a geography of belonging in which the landscape of his experiences played out not only in specific places but against a backdrop of personal and social influences. As I considered Liam's stories of place and belonging, I realized that he had composed for himself a geography of belonging in which place and belonging were closely entwined. In this chapter, I follow the thread of belonging for the participant Liam in an attempt to unravel and therefore better understand the nature of his sense of belonging within his multiple and varied communities as



The Second Son.m4a

<sup>39</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

well as the ways in which he both shaped his geography of belonging and was shaped by his geography of belonging.

In discussing her students and her desire to bring them out into the desert of New Mexico to write, Natalie Goldberg (2007) wrote, “They did not have to go to my wilderness to write, but they had to be willing to enter their own” (p. 254). Goldberg went on to ask, “Where will you have to go, to tell your story? What desert will you have to enter” (p. 254)? Goldberg’s reflections on the metaphorical places and spaces we need to inhabit to understand our experiences evoked in me reflections on some of the ways the narrative commonplace of place has shaped the way in which I understood my own experiences as well as the ways in which I understood myself and therefore the experiences of others. In this inquiry, I think of place both in the literal sense of the actual places in which experiences are situated and in the metaphorical sense of social, emotional, and personal spaces in which experiences occur. In this chapter I wonder about how a sense of belonging might have helped one of my participants deal with experiences that positioned him on the edges of community by unpacking the complex ways in which he storied both place and belonging.

### **Choosing a Found Community**

The conceptions of found and chosen communities are useful in illuminating the ways in which the participants in this inquiry are positioned and position themselves within community. It was difficult to unravel the complexity of the participant Liam’s sense of belonging within his various communities. He moved fluidly through both found and chosen communities, shaping a space for himself within both. His sense of belonging was located geographically within the town of Crocus where he grew up and still resided at the time of this inquiry. His stories of life in Crocus demonstrated his connection to that place, a connection that was both physical in terms of actually living there and metaphorical in terms of the way in which Crocus lived within Liam’s memories and stories. In some ways, his sense of belonging continued to be located within the school he attended from kindergarten to grade twelve even though he graduated two years prior to this inquiry. There was a very physical component to Liam’s belonging, a sense that he was connected emotionally to the geographical place of his youth. During this inquiry, he lived with his family and worked in the town at a local restaurant. He also traveled daily into a nearby city to attend university. Many times in our discussions, Liam mentioned that he had no desire to leave Crocus. He said that he hoped to become a teacher and return to teach in the

same school from which he had graduated. He articulated a strong sense of commitment to the geographical place in which he grew up, often talking about following in his father's footsteps as a civic representative.

At the same time, Liam's sense of belonging carried with it a connection not only to the physical location or place but also to the sociality he experienced there, a sociality that was shaped by place over time. Liam's described his family as one of a group of families that first settled there. Liam's familial surname, Braddock, meant something to the people living in Crocus and carried with it some degree of recognition and respect. In Chapter Seven I discuss how another participant, Brooke, also spoke about the importance of her surname within the community where she grew up. For both of these participants, connection to family and association within a particular family formed an important piece of their acceptance within the communities of their youth.

In our first research conversation, Liam shared that his father held an important public office in the town of Crocus and that the Braddock family owned several successful businesses that operated both within and outside of the town. By Liam's own description, he knew nearly everyone in the town and nearly everyone knew him, most within the context of his well-established family. Liam's participation in the larger community of Crocus, then, was shaped by his association with his family as well as with his family's prominence within the community. During his high school years, Liam was extensively involved in student government, holding several positions on the Student Representative Council and eventually becoming student body president. He described his own participation in Crocus School as a mirror of his father's civic engagement. Liam had always lived in Crocus and had always attended the local K – 12 school. To Liam, holding a public office, whether at the student government level or the civic level, was about service to the community. He spoke often about his desire to make the school and community better.

### Mistaken Identity

Inside the circle, bloodlines tight  
we always stick together.

I am the second son  
in one of three families

who hold everything in this town.

You'd think I'd be remembered.  
I've thought so long about it,

poured myself into that place  
where he didn't even recognize me

didn't even know my name.  
Inside that circle, with bloodlines tight

you'd think I'd be remembered  
but he looked at me and said, Liam?  
How do you spell that? (Clarke, 2016d)<sup>40</sup>

Despite Liam's extensive involvement in student government and school drama, he consistently described experiences within the context of Crocus School that positioned him on the edges of the school community. One day he told me about an experience that impacted him greatly. It was toward the end of grade twelve. Liam was the student body president and, as usual, had been involved heavily in planning many school events and fundraisers over the year. The graduate committee met one day to plan the ceremonies for graduation. Among their topics of discussion was who should give the speeches, including the speeches thanking the various teachers for their support and help throughout the years. Liam's best friend, Jae, was on the graduate committee along with Liam, Mrs. Chernoff (Luanne), and the principal, among others. When the principal raised the question of who should give the speeches to the teachers, Jae immediately nominated Liam. Liam told me that he was standing across from the principal when Jae nominated him. The principal asked Jae, "Who is that?" Liam told me it was obvious to him that the principal did not recognize him despite the fact that Liam had been heavily involved in student government for years and was the current student body president.

I first heard this story from Luanne within the context of Crocus School and the ways in which the school was highly focused on athletic achievement to the exclusion of other forms of achievement. Luanne was Liam's drama supervisor and a teacher at Crocus School during the years he attended school there. She did not mention that the young man in the story was Liam.



Mistaken identity.m4a

<sup>40</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

Later, when Liam spontaneously told me the same story, I recognized it as the same story Luanne had told me in a slightly different context. I was able to compare the two versions of the story to tease out the common threads in their separate narratives. Both were deeply upset by the experience. Both articulated a strong sense of injustice over the principal's lack of recognition of a student who had served the school diligently for years. Both located the principal's lack of recognition within the context of Liam's service being unrelated to athletics, specifically basketball or hockey. At the same time, both Luanne and Liam ended their stories by speculating about the possibility that the principal might have simply been having "a bad day" (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). This willingness to frame the principal's neglect within a sympathetic context caused me to wonder if this was a strategy that both Luanne and Liam used to remain connected to or viable within a community that sought to position them on the edges.

In discussing the various social groupings of youth within the school, Liam articulated his confusion around some teachers' characterization of one social grouping of youth as "the popular group" (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014).

Liam: Mrs. Q was talking to me and she was just talking about one of the students and how he was acting up and how it was bad because he's the popular one. I just sort of stopped for a second because I never thought of him as popular....

Cindy: Who did you think was popular?

Liam: I just didn't think there was anybody who was popular.... I just thought everyone was coming in at the same level. (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014)

While Liam recognized that there were different social groupings of youth in Crocus School, he did not attribute any social hierarchy to those groups. He did not think of people as being popular or unpopular. It was a shock to him to realize that some teachers did identify social groupings of youth as popular or unpopular. I wondered how Liam's storying of himself within the school community might have shifted if the adults around him had not storied the youth within a social hierarchy. At the same time that Liam contended he did not see differences in the popularity of his classmates, he went on to identify a particular social grouping of youth as "the

jocks” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). He also identified himself as being positioned on the peripheries of that social grouping of youth.

### Student of the Month

My picture hung on the door  
inside a frame marked *Student of the Month*

except the eyes were wrong  
keyed out, two holes  
where I used to be.

My eyes had holes in them  
and I admit I was a little afraid

but the teacher laughed to reassure me.  
Why should this bother me?

and I thought, it’s not personal,  
just my picture on the door

my eyes with holes in them  
whether or not they meant it  
whoever stood there and gouged them out

I decided not to worry about it.  
I decided not to care. (Clarke, 2016i)<sup>41</sup>

Despite experiences in which Liam described being the target of ridicule, he consistently refused to identify himself as a victim of bullying. He talked with clarity about moments when other classmates treated him with disrespect and made him the object of rude and vulgar comments. When he storied those experiences, he focused on the ways in which he managed the situations to de-escalate them and deter future negative occurrences and encounters. Liam contrasted his responses to those of his friend, Trevor, who he said “played into” the ridicule and teasing (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). Liam said, “[Trevor] would always say something back to them... in the spur of the moment... [something] he thought was a good thing to say... to get them back but they brushed it off more easily because they had a group that



Student of the Month.m4a

<sup>41</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

was always laughing” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). About his own responses, Liam said, “I fought back a little more... but I knew when to fight back and when not to” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). From Liam’s perspective, a response to bullying had more to do with how resilient you were as an individual. Liam thought it important to be able to rise above incidents of abusive treatment as well as to know when it was appropriate to fight back. Liam told me people stopped bullying him when they realized he was not an easy target. Yet Liam still held onto stories of bullying. There was a tension in the competing stories Liam told of not being a victim of bullying while, at the same time, understanding how best to respond to bullying. The distinction between these competing stories is important. Liam storied himself as being the target of abusive behavior while, at the same time, refusing to identify as a victim. His story to live by was one in which he had the agency to choose his response to experiences and to self-determine his positioning within community.

It seemed important to Liam not to over-emphasize the negative occurrences that happened to him while he was in school. He said, “I don’t want to make it seem worse than it was” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). He preferred to characterize those experiences as “a daily occurrence of nuisances” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). He composed a story of himself as someone with agency and subjectivity<sup>42</sup>, despite the circumstances. Liam also talked about how he was stronger because of these experiences. Liam composed a forward-looking story where he could glean educative experiences retroactively from situations. Liam saw his experiences as part of a larger landscape of social interaction, which meant for him those experiences were more complex than the bully/victim dichotomy. Liam said, “I don’t think anything, really, is black and white” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014).

### **Creating a Chosen Community**

#### **Call It Something Different**

The night before you left  
I came over. You packed, then

we lay on the couch with the TV on,

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<sup>42</sup> By subjectivity I mean someone empowered to act. When I say that Liam storied himself as someone with subjectivity, I mean that he saw himself as a subject able to navigate situations, not as an object acted upon.



just slept, in those last hours  
before you left

not bothered in any way  
that would keep us awake

and that's how I tell the difference  
between friendship and love –

when I don't feel like I have to do anything  
on the nights before you leave

and I'm not bothered in any way.  
That's family, even if you call it  
something different. That is

the difference. With you  
it's calm. It isn't love. (Clarke, 2016a)<sup>43</sup>

Once, when Liam and I were talking about his friends, he shared with me that his best friend was a girl, Jae, whom he had known most of his life. He mentioned that they had become friends in grade six when both of their best friends at the time moved away. Liam said, “I guess we were both kind of lonely and misery likes company” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014).

At the time of this inquiry, Jae had just moved away from Crocus to attend school in a much larger city. Liam described her absence from his daily life as both difficult and complex. It was clear from our conversations and Liam's stories of Jae that he missed her desperately. At the same time, he expressed a strong desire for her to be happy, even if that took her away from Crocus and from him. Liam said, “A huge part of me doesn't want her to go... and wants her to come back but... because I know that if I asked her to stay and she did, like, I don't even want that... She wants to go. That's what she wants and that's what she's dreamed of and because that would... I couldn't even think of...” (Liam, research conversation, June 24, 2015).

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<sup>43</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



I asked Liam to describe his relationship with Jae. He said, “I always see her, me and her, as opposites” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). He said, “She’s the logical. I’m the... way out there” (Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2015). Liam described Jae as “very modern” and “activist-y” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). He said

... I always used to wear a necklace that had the yin and yang symbol... and when I think of me and Jae I think of that. You know, the white part and the black part, different... You know that white and black dot. We each have a little bit of each other, kind of, in our personalities but we’re mainly just different... But that’s kind of what makes us whole. (Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2014)

Like most of the relationships in Liam’s life, his relationship with Jae demonstrated a complexity not easily defined or bounded by categories, while, at the same time, clearly anchored to a shared sense of difference.

Difference was a reoccurring thread in my conversations with Liam. Liam described his relationships most often in terms of their difference either to other people or to other social groupings. He spoke often of the ways his relationship with Jae was different from his relationship with his girlfriend Kay. He talked about how he was different from Jae and different from the other friends in their social group. He also talked about how it was their difference, or being different, that brought his social group together.

#### Different Like Us

None of us really had much in common.  
We were just the others, the ones

who didn’t play basketball or hockey.  
How we got together, I don’t know  
but when we were together, it worked.

We were mainly just different  
and that’s what made us whole.

Here, together, we made a family  
stronger than any friendship.

We were whatever we were  
without much in common

except being different  
but we felt safe here  
together.

We kept our memories in this space  
safe and together. Different,  
like us. (Clarke, 2016b)<sup>44</sup>

As Liam and I talked over the course of many conversations, he often spoke of a consistent grouping of five or six youth he attended school with who hung together as friends for most of their high school years and beyond. He said what brought them together was their difference from the other youth in Crocus School. Liam described a dichotomy in Crocus School among the youth between those who were into sports and those who were not. Even this distinction, however, held within it a complexity that Liam struggled to explain. He said that in Crocus School the social groupings were, “Sports. And on that side is... other” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). His group of friends, he contended, were other. At the same time, it was not as simple as those who were athletic and those who were not. Among his friends was a nationally ranked fencer. Liam, himself, described a great fondness for playing baseball. He and a few of his friends also did curling in the winter. In Crocus School, though, these sports were not recognized as valuable. Liam thought that was because the hockey players and basketball players brought notoriety to Crocus School (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). Liam told me he felt the principal’s inability to remember him or recognize his name was because Liam did not play basketball or hockey. Luanne also independently expressed the same idea. It was only those who played basketball and hockey, she said, who were identified by some teachers as popular and important.

Liam’s chosen community of friends were a grouping of youth identifiable by teachers through their involvement in drama and student government. Many of their achievements outside of school, including those in athletics, were overlooked by their teachers. Nevertheless,



Different Like Us.m4a

<sup>44</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

Liam described the ways in which the friends in his chosen community were tight-knit and supportive of each other. In talking about one friend, Liam said, “There are people that don’t know they are in the group but they’re in the group...[because] he was different like us” (Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2014). Liam described himself as fulfilling the role of mother in their group (Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2014). While he described himself as the one who nurtured everyone, he said that Jae fulfilled the role of father because she kept everyone grounded (Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2014). It is interesting how Liam’s conceptions of gender and gender roles both support and subvert conventional conceptions of gender and gender roles. In some respect, Liam sustains a polarized view of gender roles – the father and the mother. His conception of those roles applies a centred definition of those roles. At the same time, Liam subverts the centred definitions of gender by applying the mother’s role to himself within his social group and the father’s role to his friend Jae. Liam’s conception of identity as it related to gender demonstrated a complex view of gender and gender roles. While both Liam and Jae took leadership roles in their chosen community, Liam described his group of friends as reciprocating their support. He said they made him feel safe, “I could do whatever I want, be whatever I was and that kind of thing, like a family” (Liam, research conversation, September 22, 2014). The idea of a close, supportive community emulating a family was another reoccurring thread in my conversations with Liam.

### **Making a Place for Community Within Difference**

Greenwood (2013) said, “All experience is placed....Places hold and shape our experience” (p. 93). Greenwood also emphasized

... as centers of experience, places teach us and shape our identities and relationships. Reciprocally, people shape places: places can be thought of as primary artifacts of human culture – the material and ideological legacy of our collective inhabitation and place-making. (p. 93)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also emphasized the importance of place to understanding experience when they identified it as one of the narrative commonplaces within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Clandinin and Connelly situate the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space research framework, which “allows our inquiries to travel – *inward, outward, backward, forward*” (p. 49), within place. For Clandinin and Connelly, the

significance of place within inquiry cannot be separated from the temporal or the personal and social. Inquiries themselves occur “in specific places or sequences of places” (p. 50) over time and in relation to people.

For Liam, place held an important influence in his sense of connection and community. He was firmly placed within the community of Crocus and within his family and his group of friends. At the same time, he described a strong desire to be instrumental in improvements in his former school and in the town of Crocus. The complexity of his connection to place was mirrored in the complexity of his relationships to the people in both his found and chosen communities. For Liam, this complexity of place and sociality created a geography of belonging that was unique to his experience. To approach an understanding of Liam’s connections to place and people, it was essential to remain connected to his experiences in that place, with those people, over time. Liam’s experiences played out on a landscape in which place and sociality were closely entwined. Indeed, in reflecting on the importance of Liam’s geography of belonging, I grew to understand that all of the participants in this inquiry demonstrated through their stories how the geography of their individual sense of belonging was not a fixed location or constellation of factors but rather was fluid and shifting. Place entwined with belonging to create a landscape of community for all of my participants and the stories they told of their identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community confirmed the importance of recognizing the multiple stories of belonging and community they composed.

## CHAPTER 7

### BROOKE: NEGOTIATING A SPACE FOR CURRICULUM MAKING ON THE EDGES OF COMMUNITY

#### Living and Learning On The Edges of Community

##### Voices From the Outside

This is what we lived.  
This is what we felt.  
This is what it was.  
This is what it meant.  
This is how it changed us.  
This is who we are.  
This is what we leave behind. (Clarke, 2016p)<sup>45</sup>

Three of the participants of this inquiry were educated as teachers. Two of those participants were employed as teachers while the third worked in a community non-profit organization. This chapter focuses on the experiences of the participant Brooke. My reflections on Brooke's experiences were informed by the context of the other teacher participants, Luanne and Jesse. As I listened to and reflected on the transcripts of our research conversations, I began to notice that the three teacher participants brought unique perspectives to this inquiry. Each teacher had placed an emphasis on relationship and all three of the teacher participants brought their personal knowledge into their professional practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).



Voices From the Outside.m4a

<sup>45</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

It occurs to me, in retrospect, that Thomas King's (2003) words are very true, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 32). As narrative inquirers we understand that all experience is narrative in nature. It should not surprise us when our participants' stories spill out past the relatively arbitrary and artificial boundaries of our planned inquiries. The lived curriculum (Aoki, 2005a) of their lives engages them whether we attend to those stories of experience or not. It is important to recognize, as well, that a lived curriculum includes both school curriculum making and familial curriculum making. While we may focus on one or the other as researchers, we must keep in mind that for our participants these varied experiences of curriculum making are intertwined. It has been an important learning for me as a researcher, as well, to open myself to the possibility of personal narratives emerging from the stories my participants tell about the experiences they've witnessed as well as the experiences they've lived. As a researcher learning alongside my participants, I learned to follow the threads emerging from stories of experience wherever they led. I grew to recognize the ways in which my own story wove itself through my understanding of the stories of the participants.

Their perspectives as teachers became an important aspect of this inquiry. As teachers, all three of these participant brought perspectives that included their education and experience as teachers. They were able to speak cogently about schooling systems from the perspective of working within those systems. They also were able to share insights about how it might be possible to shift our practices as teachers to support children and youth more effectively, particularly those children and youth positioned on the edges of the school community.

At the time of this inquiry, both Luanne and Jesse worked in the public school system. Luanne was an elementary teacher in a K-12 rural school and also spent a considerable portion of each year running the extra-curricular drama program with youth. Jesse taught in an urban high school facilitating a program in a congregated classroom that brought together youth from across the city who had struggled in the school system and who were at risk for leaving school early. Brooke was employed by a local community centre, through which she ran a youth programming stream specifically for youth and allies who identified within gender and/or romantically diverse communities.<sup>46</sup> All three women served youth who were in some way positioned on the edges of

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<sup>46</sup> In our discussions after reading an original draft of this chapter, Brooke suggested the need to take a more representative and intersectional approach to terminology identifying the youth with whom she worked. She said, "... in many cases it is a combination of numerous or even all of these factors of identity at play with the youth being served. From my own experience I know that many of the LGBTQ youth I worked with navigated numerous

their respective communities, whether through socio-economic conditions, diversity in gender or sexual orientation, social status, or perceived disability.

All three women spoke with deep respect and caring for the youth they supported and taught. Within their stories, these three teachers often compared their connections with the youth to a family connection. As they told their stories of teaching and learning alongside these youth, they talked about the ways in which their own upbringing or the ways in which they raised their own children influenced their practice, particularly with these youth. The three teachers in this inquiry were engaged in curriculum making that accessed their personal experiences and knowledge as they interacted with and taught the youth in their schools and organizations. Each engaged in familial curriculum making in their personal lives that provided them with knowledge to enrich their curriculum making within the school context. They engaged in responses with the youth they taught that could be considered familial. Accessing the knowledge they gained from their familial curriculum making and incorporating it into their professional practice within a school or institutional setting created an overlap between the identity making and curriculum making intended and planned for in the school/institution and the identity making and curriculum making unplanned for in the out-of-school/institution. As each teacher entered into relationship with youth on the edges of various communities, they brought their personal knowledge from their out-of-school/institution setting (personal) into the school/institution (practical). Connelly and Clandinin's (1988; 1999) term *personal practical knowledge*, is a conception they used to describe the ways in which teachers engage as knowledgeable and knowing persons. For Connelly and Clandinin (1999), personal practical knowledge:

...is in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in their future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (p. 1)

As they accessed their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; 1999) to support youth, these three participants engaged in a variety of curriculum making and identity

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intersections of identity and oppression by way of race, socio-economic status, disability (perceived or not perceived)... In this way each identity fed in its own respect into falling 'on the edge' of one community, as well as others (respectively) simultaneously" (Brooke, research conversation, March 27, 2016). Using the terms gender and/or romantically diverse in place of the more commonly found acronym LGBTQ sets up an inclusive framework and allows for greater diversity in gender identity, gender expression, biology, romantic as well as sexual orientation to be reflected. I was guided by Brooke in my use of these terms.



making. As their individual lived curriculum bumped up against the planned curriculum of the schools and/or community organizations in which they worked, Brooke, Jesse, and Luanne experienced significant tensions.

### **Brooke: Negotiating a Curriculum of Life in the Borderlands**

#### On the Outside Speaking In

The machine is running itself now.  
The machine is running and we're all  
scrambling inside. It's running  
on its own now.

Education is the frontline work  
to create meaningful change  
to ensure systemic change  
to ensure institutionalized progress  
so things don't fall apart.

I hear frustration.  
I hear anger.  
I wonder  
how do you live  
on a knife edge?  
Different layers  
of blame  
    the education system  
    the government  
    dominant groups  
    at the very core  
    I blame  
    myself.

A micro-aggression  
a latent assertion  
gender but not  
really gender  
construction  
in an unconscious society.

As soon as you notice it  
you've got to let it go.

Certain things should not be negotiable  
like unlearning the things that obscure.  
It's just a story we tell. On the surface,

it's believable but damaging  
for those who don't fit.  
There are a lot of stories  
that people need to hear  
that people need to know.

Someone said, directly to me,  
you should not be the face of this work.  
You're too pretty to be a lesbian.  
Another said, you're straight.  
You can't be the face of this work.  
I'm not the face of anything.  
I recognize

I'm cis-<sup>47</sup>  
I'm straight  
I'm educated  
I'm white

I get that.  
I'm conscious but

who am I in this discourse?  
Who am I in this conversation?  
What is ethical?  
Where is the line between  
letting things go and standing up  
but not so far you become  
what they are. It's a trade off  
between what you want to accomplish  
and what you're willing to do.  
I use these positions to be heard because  
mainstream demographics will only respond  
to mainstream platforms.

My mentors say  
you have what you have right now.  
It takes more than one epiphany to effect change.  
Have patience for slow change  
but we don't really want to change.  
We only want to appear to change  
and every day there isn't change  
is a hard day for people I know  
people who know  
the things you hold dear

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<sup>47</sup> The term "cis" is an abbreviation of the term cisgender which refers to "a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex" (Retrieved from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cisgender>).

can all be stripped away.  
Knowing that  
shouldn't be normal.  
It should start by listening.

Injustice ingrained in a system  
I can never escape. I survive  
by speaking from the outside. (Clarke, 2016f)<sup>48</sup>

Brooke came to this inquiry as a referral from a colleague who had worked extensively with her in the community supporting gender and/or romantically diverse youth. When I first contacted her, Brooke's work involved the coordination of youth programming in a non-profit organization supporting gender and romantically diverse community members and their allies, families and friends. Brooke was in her late twenties and had recently moved to this western Canadian city after completing an undergraduate degree in Education and International Development. Her position as a department head for youth development and education had brought her into contact with a demographic of young people identifying as diverse in gender and attraction. Much of our opening conversations included long discussions in which Brooke helped me to understand the current discourse associated with this demographic and the ways in which their identities often defied easy categorization within the current constructs of evolving language. Brooke helped me to see categorization through terminology as inherently hetero and cis normative. She held that our current language usage constructs a world where the identities of youth in terms of gender, romantic and/or sexual orientation often defy or lie outside of language, which is insufficient currently to describe who they know themselves to be. Brooke explained, "as more and more people step into their identities, the more language is evolving to support the affirmation of who they are" (Brooke, research conversation, March 17, 2016).

I began my interactions with Brooke as a means of connecting with potential gender and or sexually diverse youth who might be interested in participating in this inquiry. One young person referred by Brooke did express a desire to join the inquiry and identified Brooke as a



<sup>48</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

significant adult in their<sup>49</sup> life. I began meeting with Brooke to engage in research conversations. The young person, however, was unable to acquire parental permission for the inquiry and subsequently we were unable to proceed. Nevertheless, Brooke and I had, by this time, established a growing research relationship and we agreed to continue with our conversations.

Many of the conversations Brook and I shared throughout the months in which we met were focused on issues of social justice and equity for people who are diverse in gender identity and expression, attraction and biology. Our conversations also spilled over into other social justice issues such as gender parity, racism and socio-economic disparity. Brooke was passionate about social justice and often spoke of her frustration with the ways in which institutions and systems created barriers for people who did not conform to societal expectations set up within a historical legacy of oppression. On a day in mid-July, Brooke and I sat talking in a busy coffee shop about the need for feminism in our culture and the ways in which sexism had become prevalent and normalized. We talked about how there were rewards socially for following the rules or being a good citizen of the system. One of those rewards, she said, was that you fit in (Brooke, research conversation, July 15, 2014). Her assertion made me wonder – fit into what? The community? Expectations? Social constructions of dominance and power? Certainly these were subjects that Brooke and I had discussed often. What I noticed in our discussion that day, as well, were the ways in which the personal overlapped with the political. Brooke did not speak exclusively about political issues. Her highly articulate political discourse was interspersed with stories of her own personal experiences. In my reflections on our conversations, I began to attend to the overlap between the personal and political and/or the professional and the ways in which those overlaps shaped Brooke’s identity making.

Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) said, “The negotiation of a curriculum of lives intimately connects narrative understandings of identity making and curriculum making, even as we move within, between, and across multiple home, community and school places” (p. 51). Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin have helped me understand that identity making is interwoven throughout the act of curriculum making in peoples’ experiences. As individuals, and even communities, engage in curriculum making, identities shift and resituate in response to the

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<sup>49</sup> Use of the plural pronoun “their” is deliberate. The participant requested gender-neutral pronouns and suggested use of the plural as an acceptable gender-neutral reference. Although this participant did not continue with the inquiry, I use the gender-neutral “their” to honour their request.

experience of curriculum making. The shifting nature of identity making in response to curriculum making was evident in the narratives of experience shared by Brooke.

I'm Not The Girl You Thought I Was

Where am I in this life?  
What am I doing with this life?  
What does it matter who I am?

I'm cisgender. I'm straight.  
I'm digestible, the way white bread is digestible.  
I'm not immediately threatening  
but when the voice comes out  
I'm not the girl you thought I was.

I don't always live in this community,  
bring a different demographic  
enter into difference. Maybe  
it's the right time.

I don't have a job: I have an identity.  
It's always going to be who I am.  
I will always see through this lens.  
Will I follow the rules? Absolutely.  
Will I challenge them by saying  
what I think? Yes. I'll do that, too.

I'm tired of being crazy on my own.  
That's my past but it feels like the present  
strange to navigate, the rhythm of being there  
feels like waking up in a foreign place.  
This isn't my life anymore.  
I am living inside someone else's life.  
I need to be where someone knows me.

When did I become an adult?  
When did I become the person that's trusted?  
I need to know.  
What am I missing?  
Where is this taking me?  
I don't think I want to go that way.  
I hope this story has a happy ending. (Clarke, 2016c)<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



The poem *I'm Not The Girl You Thought I Was* evolved from several research conversations I had with Brooke over the course of this inquiry. As the poem suggests, Brooke was engaged in negotiating a curriculum of life built upon her identity as someone supporting gender and romantically diverse youth. It was apparent from our first research conversations Brooke's sense of self was deeply connected to her professional identity. This became even clearer when not long after our research conversations began, Brooke was dismissed from her position with the non-profit organization. During her tenure with the non-profit organization, Brooke had garnered considerable public recognition both locally and nationally for her dedication to issues related to the creation of safer schools and communities such as establishing GSAs<sup>51</sup> in public schools and had received community awards for her work with gender and romantically diverse youth. The termination of her position with the non-profit organization came as a complete surprise to Brooke and the turmoil associated with her dismissal created for her moments of deep reflection. Suddenly, Brooke found herself positioned on the edge of a community to which she had belonged, a community she valued highly, for reasons that seemed random and arbitrary. As her position in the community shifted, so too did her identity. Her experience was an example of some of the ways in which communities themselves are fluid, further undermining the metaphor of marginalization. Like identity, positioning within community is fluid and shifting.

As Brooke struggled to make sense of her current situation, she often reflected on her past and on her epistemological framework. When she was still employed in an official capacity to coordinate youth programming she told me, "I don't have a job. I have an identity" (Brooke, research conversation, May 9, 2014). When her particular position ended, Brooke sustained her identity as a person dedicated to supporting gender and romantically diverse communities, despite her doubts about how she would continue to be an effective advocate going forward. I was particularly struck by the ways in which Brooke wove together both her personal and professional identities. She lived in the tension of their complex interaction. She said:

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<sup>51</sup> The acronym GSAs refers to Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances. Brooke preferred the term Gender and Sexuality Alliances as it implies a broader range of identities reflected in those who attend the safe space.

I'm more of, like, a practical knowledge person... One of the reasons I switched to Education was because I felt it was more of a practical knowledge... versus only doing a bachelor's in International Development. I thought, okay, I'm going to have all this wonderful knowledge in my head and what have I actually applied? What do I actually, practically know about these theories when they're applied? That was what was important to me so it was one of the reasons I switched to Education... because it gives you hands on." (Brooke, research conversation, July 15, 2014)

For Brooke, then, the practical and the theoretical had to come together to create useable knowledge. In her work with the community centre and beyond she was able to bring together her theoretical and practical knowledge to effect change in the world. As Brooke directed her education and employment in ways that would help her to hold onto the tensions between her personal and professional lives, she engaged her personal practical knowledge to create and sustain communities supporting gender and romantically diverse youth. When her position within the community centre ended, Brooke continued to seek ways to engage her personal practical knowledge to sustain a story to live by according to her identity as an advocate for diverse persons and communities.

#### Mother Figure

I don't consider myself a mother,  
but I know about  
the need. My own mother isn't around,  
my biological mother, that is.

It's an emotional connection  
that need I still look for  
in my life but I can't be  
their mother. I can be  
their mentor, somebody  
they can count on  
who's not going to judge  
who's going to accept  
unconditionally  
and that's how I view  
family,  
within appropriate boundaries.

They know I see them  
as my kids. They trust me

to help them. They know  
they're my kids and when stuff happens  
I get Momma Bear crazy.  
The kids are my family. (Clarke, 2016e)<sup>52</sup>

Brooke indicated some of the youth she worked with were consistently negotiating a relationship with her that was more reminiscent of a familial relationship than a professional one. Brooke said the lack of a relationship with her own biological mother made it easier for her to understand these youth's desires for a maternal figure (Brooke, research conversation, May 9, 2014). She did not share details of the circumstances surrounding her biological mother; however, this gap in the stories she told of her personal experiences became a silent story underlying her descriptions of her interactions with the youth she worked with. She held the tension of a desire within some to interact with her as a mother figure alongside her own knowing for such a need and the importance of professional boundaries.

As the poem *Mother Figure* indicates, the negotiation of a relationship where both the professional and the personal/familial could exist was complex and often bumped up against her own deeply held desire to protect and shield the youth from risk and discrimination. Despite her insistence on professional boundaries, during our research conversations, Brooke often referred to the youth she worked with as her kids. She described experiences where she purposefully interceded in situations to try to protect them. Her understanding of engaging in relationship with these youth on a professional level included incorporating the personal, within appropriate limits, into professional interactions. Often, Brooke's incorporation of personal knowledge into her professional practice reflected her understanding of familial relationships. One way the personal can be understood is as being formed in a familial curriculum-making world.

Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) discussed the importance of familial curriculum making to the processes of identity making and the composition of stories to live by. They defined familial curriculum making as:

an account of parents'/families' and children's lives together in homes and communities where the parents and families are an integral part of the curricular process in which



Mother Figure.m4a

<sup>52</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



families, children/learners, subject matter, and home and community milieu are in dynamic interaction. (pp. 7-8)

Familial curriculum making then occurs in an out-of-school context. Brooke accessed her out-of-school curriculum making and brought it into an institutional context in order to engage more effectively with the youth she served. Brooke's institutional curriculum making, which is reflective of her familial curriculum making, created tensions for Brooke and my other teacher participants. As I engaged in research conversations with the participants in this inquiry, it became apparent that many were describing experiences in which they accessed their out-of-school curriculum making and in so doing, experienced tensions with respect to their positioning within their social milieus. Their accessing of out-of-school curriculum making also became part of their identity making processes. This is consistent with Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin's understanding:

The children, family, and teachers experienced tensions as they bumped with the dominant social, cultural, linguistic, and institutional narratives shaping the milieu in which schools are situated. We understood these tensions as part of the negotiation of a curriculum of lives. (p. 6)

Although she did not view herself as a mother to the youth, primarily because they were so close in age, she described strong relational connections that reached beyond the professional. In this way, Brooke was composing a story of relationship within a professional context that drew on familial curriculum making.

The composition of community for Brooke included an aspect of familial curriculum making. When she described herself as going "Mama Bear crazy" (Brooke, research conversation, May 9, 2014) when her kids were treated poorly, she evoked a familial metaphor in which part of the knowledge Brooke carried and engaged was based on her understanding of the relationship between a mother and her children. As Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) suggested, being engaged in familial curriculum making created both tension for Brooke as she attempted to navigate between the personal and the professional and it became part of her identity making process. Just as her job became part of her identity, her identity formed by maternal attitudes towards the youth she worked with became part of how she embodied her personal practical knowledge.

## Familial Metaphors in School

### That Means Something to Them

You have to understand  
gender is

abstract  
changing  
evolving  
dynamic

gender is not  
universal  
truth.

I touch base when they come in  
who are you  
where are you from  
what pronouns do you prefer  
how did you hear about us  
why did you come

gender diverse or  
diverse in attraction  
sexually diverse or  
gender fluid or  
family or  
friends or  
educators or  
professionals

a men's group  
a women's group  
a gender evolution for trans persons group  
a bi-sexual/pan-sexual group

walking political statements  
convenient targets  
shifting marks.

There are no easy answers  
except  
we are who we are.  
We feel good when we connect  
when we love who we love  
regardless. You can say

gay, straight, lesbian, and  
that might help you  
but it will never tell  
the whole story. (Clarke, 2016k)<sup>53</sup>

As mentioned previously, Brooke's story to live by had strong identity threads related to her work as an advocate for persons who are diverse in gender and attraction. We shared many discussions around the appropriate language with respect to evolving communities of identity. A large part of Brooke's work focused on public education at conferences and with different community and school groups helping what she called the mainstream to understand the discourse of gender and/or romantically diverse communities, especially with respect to self-identification and naming lived identities. Brooke understood naming to be a powerful use of language that could both elucidate and obfuscate depending on how it was used and the context within which it was used. Brooke's understanding of the power of naming began with her own experiences and the ways in which she was identified and understood by the town where she came from based on the familial lineage associated with her last name. Brooke said:

When I go back [home], which is the town where my dad grew up in and which is where my grandma is and which is where I lived until I was in grade three . . . when people know that I'm a McGregor, that means something to them. (Research conversation, July 15, 2014)

Brooke and I talked about the way in which naming, particularly the choice options for familial surnames, has become more complicated as people have begun to question and in some cases even reject the patriarchal paradigm of children taking their father's surname, and how this is navigated in families. At one point in our discussions, Brooke talked about how familial surnames can in many ways act in identity creation within ourselves, as well as in how others define us. She said that knowing her last name is McGregor means something to the people in her hometown and through this sense-making framework an identity is projected onto her during interaction. Brooke talked about how people in her home town felt like they knew who she was and what values she aligned with based on her family name. I wondered if part of that meaning

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<sup>53</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

making through family name recognition was about the short cuts in relationship that sometimes occur based on assumptions made about that family name. As Brooke pointed out to me, such shortcuts based on assumptions often bump up against youth seeking to identify themselves fully while navigating the conventions of their cultural and linguistic environments. She understood the ways in which names position people within community in the same way identity can position people within community. Names can become categories that either value or devalue an individual's position within a community. Tensions arise for those who understand their genders and their identities as fluid. In particular, Brooke highlighted the difficulty for individuals who experience gender fluidity or gender neutrality in affirming and naming themselves in a way that honours their experiences of identity without limiting it by the confinements of linguistic structure.

The poem *That Means Something to Them* draws on Brooke's understandings around the difficulty of engaging a lexicon of identifiers that are inadequate to describe the experiences of diverse people in relation to gender and attraction. In her work, Brooke navigated the engagement of language to describe or characterize very carefully. She told me she started by asking an individual what pronoun they preferred her to use as an identifier (Brooke, research conversation, May 9, 2014). Brooke carried with her experiences of being named based on the lineage of her surname and drew parallels between the assumptions made about her based on this name and the assumptions made about the youth she worked with based on the identifiers they, or others, used for them. In her experience, being named as a McGregor in her home community, with all the assumptions that came with that name, was similar to being identified as he or she based on perceived gender expression. Her practice, then, was to create space for each individual to name themselves, to provide her with the associations they wished her to bring forward into their relationship. This was a powerful negotiation of community. Brooke understood "You can say / gay, straight, lesbian, and / that might help you / navigate / but it will never tell / the whole story" (Clarke, 2016k). Because she understood her own story of identity to be more complex than it appeared, she recognized the complexity inherent in the identities of youth and communities with whom she worked.

### Speaking From the Borderlands

Brooke's practice was shaped by her own experience and the points of connection she recognized in the experiences of youth who similarly navigated social environments that assumed aspects of their identities based on linguistic cues. These cues acted as gender markers and labels for attraction. As a result, she engaged in community building through the careful and thoughtful use of language and the ways it could hold a space for diversity or limit it. Because Brooke held onto a story of language in which political discourse related to identity was powerful, she engaged that power in a way that would shape spaces for diverse youth and allow them to come together in a chosen community based on their own sense of self, and not based on how their social milieu might describe or define them; this understanding and shaping of practice created many points of tension for Brooke. She understood the ways in which the larger community, and sometimes even the communities of gender and romantically diverse people she worked with, positioned her based on perceptions of her identity in relation to gender and attraction. I highlight this in the poem *On The Outside Speaking In* when the speaker, Brooke, says, "I'm cis- / I'm straight / I'm educated / I'm white / I get that" (Clarke, 2016f). To a certain extent, carrying the identifiers of being cis-gendered, straight, educated, and white could sometimes position Brooke on the outside of the gender and romantically diverse communities with whom she interacted. At the same time, Brooke challenged those assumptions as well, asking, "who am I in this discourse" (Clarke, 2016f)? For Brooke, there were no smooth answers to questions of identity or positioning within communities. The moments of dissonance she experienced as she tried to shape spaces for community both within and outside of social expectations around gender and sexuality created tensions for Brooke, tensions she was not always able to sustain.

Brooke spoke from her experience of being simultaneously on the inside and the outside of community, and from the tensions created by those competing spaces, recognizing these tensions shifted in relation to the particular person or people with whom she interacted. Her experience challenges the conventional metaphor of marginalization in which belonging is imagined as concentric rings where the individual is either more or less centrally positioned and, therefore, more or less a part of the community. Brooke's experiences seemed to match better the notion of nested communities in which the individual is at the centre and various communities, both found and chosen, are nested around her. In some of those nested

communities the individual has a deep-rooted sense of belonging; in others their sense of belonging is less prominent. In this sense, Brooke's experiences suggested that she was both positioned inside and outside of community simultaneously. The idea of being positioned both inside and outside of community evokes Anzaldua's (1987) notion of the borderlands. Anzaldua wrote:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (p. 25)

As an educational researcher interested in experiences on the edges of community, Brooke's experience of being both inside and outside of community resonated for me personally as did Anzaldua's description of borders and borderlands. For me, the "narrow strip along a steep edge" (Anzaldua, p. 25) was literally the strip of gravel on the edge of the muskeg and alongside the highway, a borderland in which I tried to compose a story of belonging. Metaphorically, it was the persistent sense of not quite fitting into any of the worlds I found myself. Many times during our conversations I experienced a sense of recognition upon listening to Brooke's stories, a sense of the need to navigate between communities or even to act as a bridge between communities.

Brooke's struggle to engage an appropriate discourse to honour and welcome the youth with whom she worked can be viewed as the deconstruction through language of borders that separated the youth from full engagement in community. For Brooke, language was the border that created an unnatural boundary. Her practice of inviting youth to self-identify empowered them to claim language and naming for themselves or, in a sense, to pass through that unnatural boundary to which Anzaldua (1987) referred, to cross the border into a community that affirmed their sense of self. Brooke understood innately the role of language in marginalization. At the same time, the complexity of Brooke's endeavor is apparent in the self-reflection and questioning created by crossing borders herself. She identified herself as cis-gendered, straight, educated, white – in these ways she belonged, to some degree, within the communities she sought to deconstruct and dismantle. At the same time, she sought to build a self-affirming community with youth positioned on the edges of community, causing her to question her own

position within both the community within which she was identified/positioned and the community she was attempting to build. Her experience demonstrated the “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldua, p. 25). As a straight, cis-gender woman, Brooke lived in a self-defined borderland space that was shaped by boundaries of dominant understandings of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and her advocacy with gender and romantically diverse communities.

## CHAPTER 8

### JESSE: NEGOTIATING A CURRICULUM OF INCLUSION

#### Meeting Them Where They Are

##### They Are

You teach whatever is in front of you.  
Vulnerable, high risk (I hate that word)  
re-entry, credit recovery,  
unsuccessful (all these words)  
in the regular classroom (whatever regular is).  
They come to me  
if they can't make it there  
or missed too many classes  
or no school-ready behaviour  
(that's my word), disruptive  
no supplies, binders, pencils  
lost                      late  
inappropriate conversations.

##### They are

frequently absent  
frequently incarcerated  
involved  
with mental health  
wards of the court  
social services, or  
  
criminal experiences  
typically defy authority.



Justice is arbitrary.

The kids say,  
    we are the rejects  
    we are the pot-head  
    rejects  
    nobody else wants.  
They don't recognize  
their own hard work.  
They are kids  
no matter how seasoned  
or streetwise. They are still  
kids. I say it doesn't matter.  
what happened to get us here.  
The point is, we are here.

Their lives are not our lives but  
we are more alike than we are different.  
It's just the experiences we have  
that make our understanding of each other  
different.

So they come to me  
and we always say yes,  
never turn anyone away.  
What do you need of me?  
What do you need from this place?  
Can you manage this?  
Is this what you see happening for you?

What impact do I have on kids  
who have made bigger decisions in their lives  
than I'll ever make? Why should they listen  
to me, a white woman, listen to me say,  
Hey, I think you should do this?  
Saying I want a better life for them  
is saying what they have  
is not good enough.  
Instead, I ask  
how can we work together  
to take the place you didn't think  
you could take before. (Clarke, 2016m)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



They Are.m4a

Jesse was a veteran teacher who had worked in the public school system for eighteen years. I first met Jesse as a graduate student in a class for which I was a co-instructor. Jesse's class discussions often focused on her recent teaching assignment working with youth who appeared to be struggling in the public school system. Her many stories of school and the ways in which she navigated the schooling system prompted me to approach her about my doctoral research. My initial thinking was to investigate whether or not Jesse could put me in contact with any youth from her program who had recently graduated and would be willing to be participants in this inquiry. Jesse agreed to look into the possibility and also expressed her own desire to participate. We began to meet in late April of 2014. Although we were unable to identify any youth willing to participate in the inquiry, we decided to continue with our research conversations. Very early in our conversations it became apparent to me that not only did Jesse serve a population of youth who were positioned on the edges of the public school system by the system itself but also Jesse experienced being positioned on the edges of the professional teaching community because of her individualized approach to supporting these youth in their continued education.

At the time of this inquiry, Jesse had spent the last thirteen years of her teaching career working in an alternate school setting providing individualized programming in a congregated classroom for youth considered to be at risk for leaving school early. Twelve of the past thirteen years were at one inner-city school serving a demographic of youth primarily from lower socio-economic situations, many of whom had experienced incarceration, teen-aged pregnancy, and a variety of family difficulties. All had been identified by the school division as at high risk for leaving school early. Many of them had previously left school and had returned as older youth to finish off their grade twelve credits. When Jesse and I began our research conversations, Jesse had just completed her first year in a new inner-city school where she had been asked to replicate the program from her previous school. She described her teaching assignment as focusing on "re-entry or credit recovery" for youth who were "unsuccessful in the regular classroom" (Jesse, research conversation, April 25, 2014).

From the beginning of our conversations together, it was clear Jesse was uncomfortable with the way in which her school division characterized the youth she taught. She preferred to describe them as lacking "school-ready behavior" (Jesse, research conversation, April 25, 2014).

Each time she shared the descriptors that her colleagues used to describe these youth – descriptors like disruptive, inappropriate, and disrespectful – she quickly provided her own understanding of their behavior, which was considerably different from the ways in which her colleagues framed the youths’ behaviors and activities. For example, Jesse explained that her colleagues identified some of the youth as in need of her program due to excessive tardiness and inappropriate language. Jesse, on the other hand, framed their behavior as originating in a lack of familiarity with the social mores of the school context. She said,

They just don’t understand that there are some things that are, perhaps, things we shouldn’t discuss publicly... but they do in their own lives so they don’t understand why you wouldn’t [at school]... I mean, school’s part of their life so why wouldn’t you discuss it there as well? (Jesse, research conversation, April 25, 2014)

For Jesse, it was a natural circumstance to have home life overlap with school life. While she recognized the different purpose of each context, she also understood that for many youth these distinctions were not clear. Their lives in school and out of school were the same. They did not compartmentalize and distinguish between the two contexts. This difference in Jesse’s understanding and interpretation of the youths’ behaviours set her apart from her colleagues and, at times, created tension for Jesse as she sought to achieve a narrative coherence (Carr, 1986) between her own professional identity and personal identity.

### People Learning

I had to adjust my thinking,  
my expectations. Not  
lower them but adjust them.  
I had to find my way.

Kids know themselves.  
They know what they are capable of.  
It's saying it out loud that terrifies them.  
We ask them to unlearn  
the things they know  
unlearn  
their history  
all they really have  
their life.  
You can't disrespect that  
their life  
or ask them

to be different  
from who they are.

They are all so  
uniquely chaotic.  
I like the chaos.

Kids always know  
what's best for them.  
When we don't get it  
in the message they give us  
they make the message  
louder. They don't say  
*I feel undervalued*  
They just don't come to school.  
They don't say  
*I feel like you don't respect me.*  
They tell you to fuck off.  
They communicate directly.  
As professionals it's our job  
to figure it out.  
The learning is what's most important  
but not more important  
than the people doing the learning. (Clarke, 2016h)<sup>55</sup>

In the poem *People Learning*, I bring together several of the ideas Jesse shared over the course of our research conversations about her personal practical knowledge and her professional identity. Jesse articulated an understanding of the need for a teacher to enter into the worlds of the youth she teaches in order to understand more deeply not only their experiences but also how those experiences shaped the needs each youth brings to a learning moment. Jesse's understanding of her own need to "adjust my thinking / my expectations" (Clarke, 2016h) is reminiscent of Lugones (1987) argument for a perspective of loving perception and a need to travel to the worlds of the other.

Lugones (1987) emphasized the need to travel metaphorically into the world of another in order to perceive their world more deeply and more fully. Lugones distinguished between "arrogant perception" (p. 4) and "loving perception" (p. 5). When one sees with arrogant



<sup>55</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

perception, one fails to identify with another. In discussing her own experience as the object of arrogant perception, Lugones said,

...they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this *while we are in their midst*... Their world and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity. (p. 7)

Lugones' description of the active imposition of arrogant perception calls to mind Jesse's description of the ways in which her colleagues characterized the youth referred to her program. In a congregated classroom, the youth have essentially been rendered invisible, as Lugones suggested, to the rest of the school, in particular to the teachers who experienced their behaviour as inappropriate within the "regular classroom" (Jesse, research conversation, April 25, 2014). In my own career as a special education teacher, I have often heard particular classroom spaces referred to as the regular classroom. It begs the question, are all spaces outside of those particular classrooms then, by extension, irregular? What about the children and youth who find themselves in those irregular spaces? How does framing of spaces as regular and irregular, or even special, shape the identity of children and youth?

Jesse, in her role as a teacher within a classroom viewed as irregular by many of her colleagues, carried forward the tension of recognizing the need for an alternative approach for the youth she taught while also recognizing the need for those youth to feel they were a part of the school community as a whole. Jesse also held the tension of creating a space in which the youth who attended her program felt safe from the pressures their previous school experiences had generated, while at the same time trying to create a bridge to the larger school as a whole. The youth that Jesse served, however, also held that tension. They were aware of their positioning within the school as alternate and irregular. They recognized the program that supported them to complete their credits and graduate was also a program that set them apart and, as Lugones (1987) suggested of arrogant perception, rendered them invisible.

An essential part of Lugones' (1987) argument was the need for loving perception with someone who dwelt within a world different from one's own. Loving perception, from Lugones' perspective, required one to see through the eyes of another, to travel into their world and to understand how that world constructs not only that person but also how it constructs you as a traveller in that world. In this way, loving perception reinstates another's subjectivity and

creates the opportunity for meaning making between two subjects. Lugones describes loving perception as an interdependence. Lugones wrote,

Through travelling to other people's "worlds" we discover that there are "worlds" in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resistors, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable. (p. 18)

Jesse described herself as being from another world than the worlds in which the youth she taught lived. She once said, "I can only see through my eyes" (Jesse, research conversation, May 22, 2014). She recognized how different her perspective was from the youth she taught. At the same time, she described working very hard to understand the experiences of these youth and also recognized the necessity for her to adjust her thinking and expectations in order to enter more fully into an understanding of their experiences.

As the poem *People Learning* suggests, Jesse achieved a degree of loving perception when she gained an appreciation for the chaotic nature of the lives of the youth she taught. "They are all so / uniquely chaotic. / I like the chaos" (Clarke, 2016h). She also recognized the need to shape the schooling system to support the needs of these youth rather than asking the youth to reshape themselves.

You can't disrespect that  
their life  
or ask them  
to be different  
from who they are. (Clarke, 2016h)

In expressing her appreciation for the "uniquely chaotic" (Clarke, 2016h) characteristics of the youth she taught, Jesse articulated her own respect for their identities and the lives each youth led. This was in contrast to the school culture, which ostracized and isolated the youth by focusing on expectations that were not relevant in the youths' lives. For Jesse, the learners were the most important piece of the educational puzzle: "The learning is what's most important / but not more important / than the people doing the learning" (Clarke, 2016h). Jesse demonstrated an understanding of the importance of relationship in her interactions with the youth who entered her classroom. She viewed herself as both a teacher and a learner. Furthermore, she understood

that she could learn a lot from these youth and also that she needed to learn those things in order to be effective as their teacher.

In Jesse's recognition of the youth as people from whom one could learn, she began to position the youth differently within the landscape of their educational experiences. Jesse saw the youth in her program as people who contributed to not only their community but also the school community and the larger community as a whole. Because she saw these youth as valuable, they began to see themselves as valuable contributors to the community and they began to shift their own positioning within the community. Jesse's recognition of the value of their reciprocal relationships is reminiscent of Lugones' (1987) description of meaning making that can arise from reciprocal relationships:

Only then could I see her as a subject even if one subjected and only then could I see at all how meaning could arise fully between us. We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated, we are lacking. So travelling to each other's "worlds" would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other. (p. 8)

As Jesse put it, "As professionals it's our job / to figure it out" (Clarke, 2016h).

### **Holding the Tensions of Professional Identity and Personal Identity**

#### This Is My Job

Eighteen years  
it's the only place I'd be  
the only place I'd be.  
I landed here and thought  
this is it. Just right here.

I love the kids but  
when I leave them  
at the end of the day,  
I leave them and I go home  
to my family. I have a good life,  
a good, comfortable life.

Of course I worry about them  
just as you would worry about anybody  
taking on something new, but I don't feel  
any sense of ownership or  
any sense of unwillingness  
to let them go. That's the job.

I want them to have their own identities.

That's why I'm the paid employee  
with the training and all this  
life experience. It's my job  
to figure it out.

The kids in my class ask  
if I get more money to teach them  
because they're difficult  
because they are so much less  
pleasant, I should be paid more.  
I tell them, I don't teach because  
I want money or power  
or any other reasons except  
I am their teacher.  
I am not their friend.  
I am their teacher.  
This is what I have to do.  
This is what I want to do.  
These are my obligations,  
what I require of myself.

I always knew I'd be a teacher.  
I always considered my profession  
teaching. Some people say,  
you're a mother first  
but that's not a profession,  
that's a life choice. Although,  
I don't know. Maybe teaching  
is a life choice, too. (Clarke, 2016n)<sup>56</sup>

In Jesse's stories to live by, she distinguishes between her identity as a teacher and her identity as a mother. She is clear in her understanding that her role is not to be a mother or a friend to the youth that come into her program. At the same time, Jesse held a lot of tension around entering into relationship with these youth while still maintaining her professional identity as a teacher. Repeatedly in our conversations she said, "It's my job" (Jesse, research conversation, May 22, 2014; June 10, 2014) and "I take my job seriously" (Jesse, research



<sup>56</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

This Is My Job.m4a



conversation, May 22, 2014) but Jesse also described herself as “not an expert” (Jesse, May 8, 2014). For Jesse, being a professional meant approaching teaching seriously and with a sense of purpose. It also meant recognizing the gaps she held in personal understanding and experience and how those gaps impacted her ability to support youth.

Jesse’s stories to live by were unique from the other teachers in this inquiry in the ways in which she described her role as a teacher within the school. While she brought personal aspects of herself to her teaching, often sharing stories of her family and their experiences, she shared those personal experiences as a way to establish relationship with the youth in her program. She wanted them to view her as a person living and learning in the world so they could begin to see themselves as people enfranchised to live and learn in the world as well. At the same time, like the other teachers in this inquiry, Jesse’s identity as a teacher was complex and included aspects of her identity as a mother and as an individual moving through the world.

She identified being a mother as a life choice rather than a profession and then speculated as to whether or not teaching was also a life choice (Jesse, research conversation, June 10, 2014). In this way, Jesse drew a parallel between her identity as a teacher and as a mother, seeing both as life choices. This in some ways contradicted her sense of teaching as strictly a profession in which one must proceed seriously and with a sense of intent and purpose. Drawing a parallel between teaching and motherhood as life choices provided Jesse with a broader view of the possibilities teaching held in supporting the youth that entered her program. In her recognition of the complexity of her own professional identity, Jesse entered into teaching youth on the edge of the school community with a sense of openness and possibility, an approach to teaching that was an acute contrast to the teaching approaches previously experienced by the youth she served.

When Jesse and I read the poem *This Is My Job* together, she said she would never want any of the youth she taught to think she did not love or care for them (Jesse, research conversation, March 21, 2016). She identified her feelings as complex, including a strong necessity for professionalism as well as the closeness of personal relationships, even, at times, relationships with the youth she taught that accessed components of Jesse’s familial relationships. She told me her separation of work and home was not reflective of a lack of caring. Rather, it was a survival strategy. It allowed her to manage her work emotionally so that she could continue to engage in the challenging, relational work she did each day with the youth in her program.

## Working Within The System To Alleviate Tension

### Through My Eyes

I try to ignore the system  
even though I have to work within it.  
I don't disrespect it, just try to use it.  
It isn't a barrier. It's just what it is.  
It's there. Just work with it.  
We can't change it but  
we can change what we do.

That's what I tell the kids.  
This is a hoop we're going to jump through  
because it gets us to the place  
we want to go. We all have challenges.  
We just see them in our own ways  
but I can only see through my eyes.  
Help me see through yours.

Guns in the hall locked us down,  
an hour in the dark whispering to each other.  
I said, I could never hurt anyone  
unless they were going after my children.  
One boy said,  
*Do you consider us your children?*  
Absolutely.  
*So, we're safe, then. (Clarke, 2016o)<sup>57</sup>*

When she felt it was necessary and appropriate, Jesse allowed her personal approach to parenting children to permeate her professional practice. For Jesse, relationship was the key to effective teaching practice and familial instinct was an appropriate part of that practice. As a teacher working with youth identified as on the edges of the school community and at risk of leaving school early, Jesse articulated her own tension with a system that at times seemed inadequate to address the needs of all the youth who were a part of it. In her stories of conversations she had with the youth in her program, she talked about sharing with them the need to recognize when it was appropriate to fight for change and when it was appropriate



<sup>57</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

simply to meet the expectations placed before them. In her professional life, Jesse faced the same choices between fighting and complying. She said,

I'll try to do what they tell me to do – make this classroom fun, engaging, fulfilling, respectful, rule-following, curriculum-based, inquiry based... I'll try to do as much as I can and then I'll turn around and do what I know works for these kids.” (Jesse, research conversation, June 10, 2014).

In attempting to meet the expectations placed upon her by the school, Jesse modeled her willingness to support the structures of that system. At the same time, she modeled for the youth a willingness to reach beyond those structures when it was necessary. Jesse held onto the tension between working within the system and reaching beyond the system in her actions while teaching. She indicated that at times she simply ignored the system while, at the same time, worked within it. She also demonstrated respect for the system by moving through appropriate channels to gain permission for class activities that might have been considered beyond the scope of the curriculum (Jesse, research conversation, June 10, 2014).

Jesse talked about the need at times to demonstrate the efficacy of her methods to the school administration (Jesse, research conversation, June 10, 2014). When she talked about these situations, she did not sound angry or upset by the necessity to justify her methods. She recognized her responsibility to act with intention when teaching. Working within the system, she felt, was a way of using it. She indicated that she did not consider it her purpose to change the system but to recognize its limitations and work to alleviate those limitations. In her own professional practice, Jesse demonstrated to the youth in her program that it was possible to navigate the expectations of the school community while maintaining your personal sense of justice and integrity. Jesse did not view her advocacy for the youth in her program as a political act. She viewed it as an integral component of her professional practice.

As with all of Jesse's descriptions of her work with youth on the edges of community, Jesse shared an awareness of the complexity of those interactions. Continually focused on her professional practice as acts of intention, Jesse was able to reach beyond a strict separation of her identity as a teacher to incorporate emotion and caring into her work. She described situations in which her school and the youth in her program experienced situations of real terror and trauma. Although not a usual occurrence, Jesse described a day when some youth had brought guns to school, causing the school to enter into a complete lockdown that lasted for three hours. During

that time, part of Jesse's role as the teacher was to ensure the youth in her program stayed within a small closet at the back of their classroom with the lights turned out. She needed to make sure they did not go onto their cell phones to text or post to social media and she needed to do all of this without alarming the youth to the point of panic. She described how in those hours in the dark closet, she employed her personal professional knowledge to help the youth understand the necessity to follow her instructions at that moment. To explain the urgency, she told them stories of her own children and the lengths to which she was prepared to go to keep them safe. The youth with her at that moment understood from her stories that she would protect them from harm in the same way she would protect her own children from harm.

The fear generated by the school lockdown and the need to remain within a dark closet for several hours interrupted the daily learning in Jesse's classroom. She described it as a break in the community of the classroom as well. While on a typical day, Jesse was able to provide the youth with a large degree of freedom in their movement and activities, on this particular day her expectations of their behaviour shifted to become much more restrictive. She held the tension of that shift for the youth by providing them with a reestablishment of community through her stories of her own children. The emotional support she provided at that moment eased the tension for the youth and allowed them the opportunity to understand the systemic need for compliance in that moment. Jesse recognized emotional support was what the youth needed and she provided them with that support at the moment it was needed. In so doing, she established trust during a traumatic incident, which further deepened their relationships. In her actions in that moment, Jesse demonstrated she understood a fundamental principle in building community, particularly with people positioned on the edges of community – the principle of earning the trust of those with whom you wish to build community.

As a teacher of youth positioned on the edge of community, Jesse recognized that her job was not to de-centre the existing social milieu of these youth or to reposition them at the centre of the existing community. She understood that in order to build community with these youth, she had to bring loving perception to them where they were on the edges of the school community. Only then could a new community grow from their being in relationship with one another in the place that they found themselves. Only then did the community they built together become not a community on the edges of the school community but rather a community nested within the school community. Jesse's acts of community building with the youth in her program

not only transformed the space of their classroom but also transformed the larger school into a space where the youth she taught could begin to imagine themselves as contributing community members.

### **Building a Curriculum of Inclusion Nested Within a School Community That Excludes**

#### Part of Something

The goal is to make school  
a place they see themselves  
a part, see themselves  
as students, as members  
a part, just as they are  
a part of this school.

Everything is for credit,  
every single thing.  
No one gets a ribbon for  
participation.  
Everything is learning.  
Everything moves us  
closer to the goal.

So kids that maybe  
were never friends  
on the street  
    because of their families  
    because of their names  
    because of their gangs  
    because of whatever  
can be friendly to each other  
in this space. Not friends but  
friendly, part of something.  
Kids who never talked to each other  
talk to each other here.  
In this space we are  
part of something.

That's why they don't graduate  
why they purposefully undermine  
their own success  
because the thought of being  
unsuccessful  
of coming back here  
is easier to handle  
than the thought of being

successful  
and going out into a place  
unknown.

I tell them,  
if you're here a minute  
or a year, you're equally part  
of this space. In this place  
all you have to be is be.  
You can be authentic  
and find a place for yourself,  
a place in this world  
that will give you a living  
and help you do  
what you need to do.  
There is a place for you.  
Here are people  
in the same space  
who feel the same way.  
Maybe together  
we can figure it out. (Clarke, 2016g)<sup>58</sup>

In bringing her personal practical knowledge to the landscape of her alternate classroom, Jesse introduced the possibility for successful community building within that space. During our research conversations, Jesse identified an important part of her role as classroom teacher in this particular setting as one of creating a welcoming space for the youth who were referred to the program. She told me that the youth often carried with them a strong sense of personal failure and a sense that they did not belong within a school setting. Often their sense of personal failure within school was based on experiences such as engaging in criminal activity, incarceration, and/or social and home lives that were challenging. Jesse saw her first task as their teacher as one of welcoming them into the classroom and exploring what level of connection and involvement would provide them with the strongest sense of community.

The youth who entered Jesse's program quickly gained a sense of her appreciation for their experiences, particularly those that had brought them to the program. Jesse did not ignore the out-of-school experiences that created complexities for them in their lives. For some of the



Part of Something.m4a

<sup>58</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

youth, this included involvement in gangs, inter-familial tensions and violence, as well as high risk behavior with substances and sexual activity. Jesse told me that it was important for her to respect their experiences and try not to negate them. Although her own life experiences were far removed from theirs, she demonstrated compassion, caring, and interest in the circumstances of their lives. In this way, Jesse enacted Lugones' (1987) loving perception, travelling to the world of the youth she taught while retaining her sense of herself as a traveler in their worlds.

At the same time that Jesse demonstrated a strong welcoming nature to youth entering her program, she established quickly that their purpose in being in the program was to re-enter school and to recover the credits that they had previously lost by leaving school early or encountering difficulties in other classes. As the poem *Part of Something* articulates,

Everything is for credit,  
Every single thing.  
No one gets a ribbon for  
participation.  
Everything is learning.  
Everything moves us  
closer to the goal. (Clarke, 2016g)

Part of Jesse's establishment of the classroom community was to identify learning as their shared and primary purpose. While it is clear Jesse regularly moved beyond the mandated curriculum in order to sustain community and learning within her classroom, she began their experiences in that space with the articulated expectation that learning would be at the centre of what they pursued. In this way, Jesse communicated to the youth that they had entered a learning community and that they were members of that learning community.

From Jesse's perspective, a sense of belonging was paramount to successfully welcoming new youth into the program. She did this by attending to any previous connections they might have had with current youth in the program. She also attended to things like their family names and how those might or might not encourage connection within the classroom. She spent time with each youth learning about the home places they came from, what connections they had both within this city and even within the neighbourhood of the school as well as connections to home places they might have beyond the city. Jesse recognized that her experiences were very different from the experiences of the youth who came to her classroom. At the same time, she

welcomed these differences and sought opportunities to learn from them. As bell hooks (2003) said,

All too often we think of community in terms of being with folks like ourselves: the same class, same race, same ethnicity, same social standing and the like. All of us evoke vague notions of community and compassion, yet how many of us compassionately went out to find an intimate other, to bring them here with us today? So that when we looked around, we wouldn't just find a similar kind of class, a similar group of people, people like ourselves: a certain kind of exclusivity. (p. 163)

In her recognition of their difference, Jesse invited the youth in her classroom to enter into community with her. She did not deny their positioning as other within the school community or even within her own sensibilities. She recognized that positioning and sought to reframe their shared experience by entering into relationship with them. For Jesse, then, community building and inclusion became a matter of building relationship, of learning about each other, about their differences, and about sharing points of connection within those differences. In creating this curriculum of inclusion as the first focus of their interactions, Jesse created and sustained a community in which youth previously rejected from the school community could find a learning space where they belonged.

### You Just Fall

Don't tell me things  
you don't want me to remember.

More and more I see  
their lives become  
the semblance of a life  
that most of us live.  
They find work.  
They have relationships.  
For the most part,  
they don't go to jail.  
For the most part,  
they find their way  
despite everything

but if you don't have structure  
if you don't have supports



or if you have factors  
out of your control,  
you just fall.

How many times have I heard  
someone say, *When they get  
to the real world...*  
Have you seen their world?  
It's pretty real. We do  
one thing and say another.  
I understand why the kids  
do the stuff they do,  
to try to claw themselves out  
but sometimes, too,  
just to stop for awhile.  
It's exhausting always to climb.  
There are so many obstacles.  
Finally, you just turn around  
and go home.  
It's so easy to fall  
back into that life.  
They aren't waiting patiently  
for something better.

When I hear the talk  
about how we are going to support  
students who struggle,  
it's all about changing them  
from who they are  
into someone else  
which only sends the message  
who they are  
is not good enough.

Don't solve the gap  
by getting rid of the bottom. (Clarke, 2016s)<sup>59</sup>

Inherent in my research conversations with Jesse was a constant return to the complexity of her identity making and curriculum making within the classroom community she co-created. A previous participant said, “I don’t think anything, really, is black and white” (Liam, research

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<sup>59</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



You Just Fall.m4a

conversation, September 22, 2014). The same metaphor can be applied to Jesse's take on teaching and on her identity as a teacher. She spoke with clarity and confidence about the youth with whom she worked and about the limitations of the schooling system within which she functioned. Her portrayals, however, were never two-dimensional. Constantly she qualified her descriptions and stories with examples that complicated her characterizations. Jesse inherently understood the complexity of teaching, particularly of teaching youth living and learning on the edges of community.

One of the complexities that Jesse highlighted in her understanding of the youth that she worked with was characterized by a story she told of a young woman who had spent several semesters doing credit recovery in Jesse's classroom. As the end of the school year approached and this young woman's graduation from grade twelve became more and more imminent, she began to withdraw from participation in the classroom. Jesse said that eventually she simply stopped coming to school. As was her practice when students were repeatedly absent, Jesse contacted the young woman to see what, if anything, she could do to help. Jesse discovered the young woman was terrified of graduating from grade twelve. She could not imagine a life outside of school in which she was not a student. Her identity was tied to being a credit-recovery student in Jesse's classroom.

As Jesse told me the story of this young woman, she shared also that the young woman's fears were not unfounded. From Jesse's perspective, gaps in the system bridging youth from high school to life beyond high school were next to non-existent. Jesse explained that this young woman had a toddler and that as long as she was in school she received free childcare as well as social assistance. As soon as she graduated, she would no longer have free childcare and she would have to find a job that would both support them financially and pay for childcare during her working hours. For this young woman, the prospects of finding a job, supporting herself and her child financially, and finding affordable childcare were too overwhelming to consider possible. Jesse said, "We assume we've prepared them academically. We assume their family has prepared them emotionally.... [but] this is new ground.... If she's a student, she can live" (Jesse, research conversation, May 22, 2014). As Jesse pointed out on more than one occasion, the school division and Ministry of Education emphasis on graduation rates did not take into consideration the context of young people's lives or how they would subsequently be positioned in the larger community once they left school.

Jesse's stories of youth whose desires to achieve academically bumped up against the realities of their lives reminded me that education exists within a larger context. As an educator myself and as an academic doing educational research, it is easy to experience a kind of tunnel vision in which the contexts of people's lives fall away in our desire to squeeze continuous improvement out of our ponderings of education. It seems to me that many of the factors influencing the lives of the youth who participated in Jesse's program were more complex than the schooling system recognized. While Jesse acted as a bridge to some extent between the lives of the youth in her program and their education, even she was unable to bridge that gap completely. As the poem *You Just Fall* suggests, those gaps between the planned curriculum and the lived curriculum cannot be bridged by excluding the children and youth who struggle to find a place for themselves within the schooling system. You cannot get rid of the achievement gap simply by expelling, one way or another, those who struggle to achieve. The gap is simply shifted out of the schooling system to the surrounding society. Also, as Jesse's stories of the continuing lives of the youth indicated, there is considerable work to do in bridging the gap between the schooling system and the inclusion of these youth as fully enfranchised citizens within the larger community. Jesse provided her own suggestions about how we might reframe our thinking as educators to support children and youth better. I provide those ideas in the poem, *Teaching*.

### Teaching

Teachers always say,  
*You gotta kick that kid out!*  
Why? They're doing a fine job  
ruining their future on their own.  
Why not just be here  
as they bump along the road,  
steer them in the direction  
they need to go.  
Ball caps and attendance,  
is that what we're fighting for?  
Attendance requirements just don't apply.

It's a weird message we send.  
Teachers do it for all the right reasons.  
They believe they're doing the right thing.  
They take their jobs seriously.  
They take what they have to teach

seriously. But they never take seriously  
how much kids have to teach us.  
I don't know who decided  
what we have to learn,  
what they have to teach us  
isn't serious.

Are we only teaching compliance?  
Jails teach compliance. Schools,  
I thought, were supposed to teach children.

When did we stop needing each other  
with this fabricated notion of community  
but there's so little community left.  
We're all living our lives  
and not paying attention.  
We should take care of each other.  
We should spend our time on conversation,  
on sharing. We have to figure out  
what we can do so children say  
Damn! I'm going to school today  
and I just know something amazing  
is going to happen. (Clarke, 2016j)<sup>60</sup>

Although Jesse often expressed frustration with the schooling system's limitations, she worked with focus and intention within that system to support youth whose previous experiences of school had largely been negative. She did this by adjusting her own expectations and thinking to enter into the worlds (Lugones, 1987), metaphorically, of the youth who entered her program. She recognized the necessity of creating a welcoming space for these youth and made that her primary focus as they navigated a way back into the schooling system. Jesse brought her own personal and professional identity to her role as their teacher and in so doing engaged in a curriculum of inclusion that encompassed both the mandated curriculum of the school as well as the lives of the youth she served.



<sup>60</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

## CHAPTER 9

### BEYOND THE MUSKEG: REFRAMING THE EDGES OF COMMUNITY

#### Traveling Back Into The Muskeg

##### Waiting

It is a long way from that dining room in New York  
where I clung to my mother's leg while someone took our picture  
and yet there are days when I am still that little girl.  
White ski sweater, black stretchy pants, go-go boots.  
The polaroid fades, every year the colours dim  
like my memories, receding into a dark closet  
that I pull out now and again  
to make sure they are still there.

I don't let fear show  
or the future know  
who I am when I go home at night  
after the work day is done.

Outside, someone shovels snow from the sidewalk.  
The rhythmic scrape of aluminum against concrete  
resonates through the glass into the quiet library.  
We are deep in the heart of winter's sleep.  
I imagine long, smooth paths between drifts of snow  
stretching through the city, waiting. (Clarke, 2016q)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



As Stevens (1990) said, “Everything falls back to coldness” (p. 146), the morning, its slow release of night, the dogs quiet on the carpet. My poet friends tell me I write about home a lot. It’s true – but it is not just home I write about. In some odd way I am really writing about me – about my place in the world. Not the place set aside for me but the place I set aside for myself. In these quiet moments before the day has really begun, I think about it all, about my life that was so full of awkwardness for so long, about my mother dying when I was a teenager stuck between childhood and adulthood, about my family that slowly, and in some cases not so slowly, dissolved into distance, and my mother, the illusionist, who had held us all together.

With the illusionist gone, all the smoke and mirrors were immediately evident, or, if not immediately evident then eventually apparent . . . eventually apparent. The thought arose, persistent, that my understanding of myself, of my life in and beyond the muskeg, was not what it appeared to be, like that moment in a magician’s performance when you know you are being fooled but you still can’t figure out the trick. I think for a long time I was happy to be fooled. The shock of waking up, of seeing more clearly who we were, was too daunting. On this day, though, as I write this in this quiet morning with all the sounds of the city drifting in through the window, I feel quiet myself. It seems to me now that our lives are what they are. All we can really do is live them.

I think about my friend Miriam’s enthusiasm for writing and for art, how it is infectious, how it makes me more enthusiastic. I think this is something I should nurture and support – her enthusiasm. We are both emerging or beginning, in some respect, as writers but her talent is huge. She has a connection to the north that challenges current ideologies around colonialism and notions about who has the right to tell a story. When I talk to her and she tells me about the people she has met and learned from, I reflect on how our experiences might shift if we thought of ourselves as part of the same family, without constructed distinctions. I wonder if we will ever find a place, a space, where these constructions do not restrict us.

I have censored myself from writing some of my stories because a friend once told me bluntly that I was not allowed to write about my uncle and aunt because my aunt was Cree and I, as a white woman, was not allowed to write about the Cree. I thought about my Auntie Nora and how she might have responded to that argument. She passed away more than a year ago, though, so it is too late to ask her what she thinks. My uncle told me he did not think she would see

things that way, that she would welcome the chance to tell her stories. I think I understand the need for sensitivity when writing across the constructed lines of race or any of the other constructions that divide us but I do not yet understand how denying our connections to family and experience because of these constructions helps us to be more sensitive to these issues or to understand those experiences more deeply. It causes me to think about the focus of narrative inquiry on individual experience, on the stories we compose to locate ourselves in the world or to imagine who we might become. I think about the ways in which narrative inquiry opens us up to see not the only side but another side, another frame, another version of a larger story. It is true, some stories of my family go untold because I wish to respect and honour the people involved and I do not wish to offend them. I sense there is something more important than my right, imagined or otherwise, to tell my own story. Yet I hold my wish to respect and avoid offense in tension with my own personal need to understand myself better through my experiences and the experiences of my family, with my need to find a place in the world where I fit.

I remember Liam once said, “I wish we could all just be who we are, without labels or categories” (Liam, research conversation, January 29, 2016). In this inquiry I have learned that it is often messy and difficult to assert our sense of self against the outside pressures that constitute our social milieux. As narrative inquirers, we often negotiate our understanding of these experiences amidst professional, social, and personal rules and dividing lines that at times push us apart.

As I reflected on the places/spaces I traveled to, both literally and metaphorically, over the course of this inquiry, I wondered if I should literally travel back into the muskeg to the place where I grew up. Perhaps I could travel with my dad back to Timber Cove. Together, we could reflect on our lives there together, something we have not yet done. What insights might a journey back into the muskeg bring?

There was something about that place. It left its stamp on all of us. The greatest sorrows of my life grew out of that place but it was also the home where we sheltered together for many years. Over the course of this inquiry, my feelings about the muskeg have changed, transformed, as I have grown to understand better the ways in which place shapes our identity making and the ways in which we, in turn, shape the places in which we compose our identities. I moved away from the muskeg many years ago but I had never really moved beyond the muskeg. Through this

inquiry, through listening to people tell me their experiences on the edges of the communities – places I interpreted as their own personal muskegs, I have come to embrace my own experiences as part of what made me who I am. I can draw a line, albeit not a straight line, from me today all the way back to the little girl in the muskeg. I can see myself in all of those experiences in between. I understand better how they are connected.

Reflecting on my own experiences of living on the edges of community as well as the experiences of the participants in this inquiry, I am able to see myself more clearly. As Sarton (1996) wrote, “Because I am thinking so much about the past these days I have come to see that the past is always changing, is never static, never ‘placed’ forever like a book on a shelf” (p. 95). As a result, my understanding of identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community has broadened as well. The greatest significance and, I would argue, the greatest potential of this inquiry lies in the ways in which seeing ourselves more clearly helps us to connect with the experiences of others living and learning on the edges of community. I grew to understand that the place where I grew up was neither good nor bad. It was a place I lived, a place that shaped my stories to live by and my responses to the world. As I travel imaginatively backward again into the muskeg, different stories begin to emerge.

I remember riding my horse along the roadside every day after arriving home from school, galloping away from the store and the gravel pad then galloping back again, over and over until we had worn a distinct path into the soil. I remember sitting at the back of the school bus singing pop songs on the long ride home with the other children who also traveled in and out of the muskeg each day. I remember curling up in the bus seat with my knees propped against the back of the seat in front of me reading one great book after another – *The Secret Garden* (Burnett, 1999), *Black Beauty* (Sewell, 2015), *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 2008) – books that helped me travel to other worlds beyond the muskeg and imagine new stories I might compose about myself and who I might become. I remember sitting in the new bedroom that my dad built under the sloping eaves and dormer of the living room so that I could have a room with more light and more space. In that room, I listened to music on the record player and scribbled away in journals, composing a story of myself as a writer.

The muskeg elicited feelings of fear and isolation but it also harbored us as a family. Each time I look back on those experiences, my understanding of them shifts as new experiences settle in with the old, adding additional layers to what I once thought was a completed story.



Through this inquiry, I have gained a renewed understanding of Dewey's (1938) concept of continuity – all experience is connected to what came before and to what is yet to occur. Experiences in the past, the present, and the future are all connected.

This inquiry has helped me understand the landscape of my childhood was not just a location but existed somehow inside me the same way each landscape on the edges of community existed inside the participants in this inquiry. We embodied the landscapes from which we came. The landscapes existed in the memories and the stories we continued to tell about who we were and who we were becoming.

Once, at the beginning of this inquiry, I was fortunate to attend the Prairie Research Table held at the University of Regina. Scholars working in narrative inquiry from all around North America gathered at the University of Regina to share and discuss their work. I shared my beginning thoughts about the significance of the muskeg on my identity making at the Prairie Research Table. I remember that Dr. Clandinin suggested to me that I should lay other stories of the muskeg alongside my own so that my own story might move beyond the muskeg (D. J. Clandinin, personal communication, 2013). As I reflected on Dr. Clandinin's suggestion, I thought also about the bulldozer in my poem *Muskeg*, how it was lost within the muskeg forever. Inquiring into the identity making and curriculum making of people living on the edges of community allowed me to imagine new stories about these spaces, stories in which nothing and no one is lost forever. As I laid their stories alongside my own, I began to imagine a forward-looking story of how our shared understanding of the experiences of those living and learning on the edges of community might shift and transform not only what we think about the educative nature of these spaces/places but also how we might consciously begin to transform our practice as teachers to bring forward the experiences of the children and youth we work with to create spaces of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Another unexpected outcome of this inquiry was the ways in which retelling stories from the edges of community began to transform that landscape from one of isolation and fear to one of healing. The physical places from which we told our stories have all changed. More importantly, our recollections of those places and the experiences that occurred in them have also changed. These spaces on the edges of community acted as benchmarks in our identity making. The stories we composed looking back were also forward-looking stories in which we imagined who we were in order to imagine who we might become.

## Ending Where We Began, In The Middle

“And so, in a way, a story kind of asks for an ending but we’re in the middle of it” (Cindy and Liam, research conversation, October 8, 2014).

This inquiry ends where it began, in the middle of the lives of its participants, including the middle of this researcher’s life. Negotiating an exit from a narrative inquiry is complex. The relationships established during the inquiry go on. The lives of the people go on. We continue to compose stories and to share those stories. Our understanding is only ever partial in the same way the stories we compose are incomplete, unfinished. Recognizing that we exit as we entered, *in medias res*, I offer some insights into what I have learned over the course of this inquiry, however inconclusive they may be.

## Not A Conclusion

### Surfacing

First thoughts laid in a feathered array  
against the velvet of a forest floor.

Besnard in summer. Bush  
so thick sunlight barely touches

the floor where rocks are swallowed  
by the mossy embrace of damp underbrush.

Thought barely penetrates the quiet  
inhabited only by the instinctual exchange

of predator and prey who create language  
with chirps and clicks

above the cool water of a rain-fed pond  
overflowing with the brown tea of a muskeg spring.

To slip beneath its surface, voluntarily  
feel the chill rise along the skin,

our hair floating toward the surface  
as we sink deeper and deeper.

If only we didn’t have to breathe,  
then we might stay submerged long enough

to understand the rippled surface.

Primeval instinct thrusts us up again

into the half light,  
into the rasping air. (Clarke, 2015h)<sup>62</sup>

As *Surfacing* suggests, exiting this inquiry is like coming up for air – no matter how insightful it is to stay below the surface, eventually we all have to breathe. We push again to the surface of our lives if only to make them manageable. In this final chapter, as I push back to the surface of this inquiry and to the surface of my own life, I am reminded that this inquiry began with an over-arching research puzzle, two complex, related questions I had been wondering about for years:

*What do the narratives of people positioned or positioning themselves on the edges of community reveal about the life and learning that goes on in those spaces? Furthermore, in what ways does a deeper understanding of life and learning on the edges of community shift our sense of the educative value of those spaces?*

It would be convenient and smooth to provide a definitive, uncomplicated answer to these questions. The analysis of the research conversations in this inquiry revealed, primarily, that there are no smooth and uncomplicated answers. Experiences are complex. The stories we compose about those experiences are also complex. My final reflections for this dissertation mirror that complexity.

In Chapter Three I discussed the effectiveness of poetry to convey the inherent inconclusivity of narrative inquiry. As a form of retelling, poetic expression of research invites multiple stories of interpretation. This is, after all, the purpose of narrative inquiry – to leave the inquiry open-ended, to tell and compose multiple stories of experience. For me, engaging in an extended narrative inquiry that incorporated poetic expression allowed me again and again to slip beneath the surface of my own experiences to view them from different perspectives, particularly within the frames and lenses my participants used to describe their experiences.

As with the design of this inquiry, the insights and wonderings that emerged from the analysis shaped themselves into the overlapping areas of identity making, curriculum making,



Surfacing.m4a

<sup>62</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

and community. With respect to community, I was particularly interested in the edges of community, the stories people composed from the edges of community, those spaces conventionally described by the dominant narrative as marginalized. While I organized this final chapter into those threads – identity making, curriculum making, and community – the insights and wonders they provoked often intertwined and were so closely interconnected as to be indistinguishable. Often, when I was reflecting on one, I was also reflecting on another or even all at the same time. I move forward with the recognition that even the categories presented here are constructions, as artificial as the constructions associated with the metaphor of marginalization.

### **Identity Making On the Edges of Community**

#### **Identity Making: Giving Voice to Participants' Experiences**

This inquiry into identity making on the edges of community began with several questions. Primarily, I wondered about the impact of experiences of exclusion on identity making. I wondered if the experience of being positioned on the edges of community might echo into a person's identity making. Throughout my conversations with the participants in this inquiry, I sensed that identity making was a tenuous and complex process. I wondered what happened to identity when dominant narratives storied someone as different or other. Again and again in my conversations with participants as I listened to their stories of life on the edges of community, I wondered whether or not these people positioned as marginalized eventually came to see themselves as marginalized.

The participants' narratives in this inquiry indicated that the urge for narrative coherence played a large role in these participants' identity making. Carr (1986) identified narrative coherence as a constant task to maintain the unity and integrity of identity. Integral to the quest for narrative coherence was the composition of counterstories (Lindemann Nelson, 1995) that challenged the dominant narratives inscribed on these participants' identities. One of the repeating counterstories related to identity making that emerged as a predominant thread in this inquiry was the notion of difference as both a defining characteristic and as a valuable asset. Rodriguez storied himself as a rule-breaker and a rule-maker, and not disabled. His sense of himself as a rule-breaker/maker allowed him to resist a definition of himself as disabled as it supported his identity as someone with agency and power, someone with ability. Luanne storied herself and her daughter, as well as her student, Liam, as advocates within a social milieu that

highly valued compliance of strict social norms related to specific athletic achievement. Liam said his community of friends formed because they were all identified as different. He also indicated it was their difference that drew them together into a chosen community. Both Brooke and Jesse connected their identities closely with their roles as teachers and mentors of youth who identified or were identified by difference in one form or another.

Living and learning on the edges of community, then, seemed to evoke an identity making response in these participants that embraced perceived difference and utilized it to compose stories of identity that sought narrative coherence. For Liam, embracing difference as a component of his identity making allowed him to story himself as an agent and subject in control of his social positioning. He saw himself as someone who was empowered to choose his responses to experience and to define himself. He very clearly saw his identity as nested within a larger landscape of social interactions that were much more complex than the bully/victim dichotomy inscribed upon him by others in his found community of school. Liam also composed a complex story of identity and gender that allowed him to express a gender role within the chosen community of his friends more closely matched with his identity as a gender-fluid male with strong nurturing characteristics.

In the same way that Liam's identity making from a place of difference provided him with a sense of self-defining agency, Brooke's identity making also arose out of her narrative of self, based on her perceived positioning on the edges of community. She described herself as both inside and outside community, a complex positioning that complicated her identity making. Nevertheless, because Brooke understood her identity as complex, she was able to recognize the inherent complexity in the identities of the youth she served. Brooke not only embraced difference, she assumed difference would bring with it complexity. She expected complexity in her interactions with youth and welcomed it. Like Brooke, Jesse also embraced difference as the starting point for understanding identity, her own and the youth she taught. More than once she talked about the need to shape the schooling system to support diverse identities rather than expecting youth to reshape themselves to fit the system.

Listening to these participants tell their stories and reflecting on the threads of identity making that emerged from those stories helped me to understand more deeply the causal relationship between identity making and a person's positioning within community. Identity grows out of a landscape of relationships surrounding the individual. We compose our identities

in complex layers of all that surrounds us, all that has come before and all that is at any particular moment.

### **Identity Making: A Researcher's Journey**

#### Muskeg Revisited

The store burned down  
two summers ago  
left nothing in its place  
that space  
that bound us to it  
fixed us fast and  
worked its medicine,  
empty now.

Everything returned  
to the muskeg,  
the store with its tilted windows  
red trimmed, the cabins  
semi-circled around it,  
the paddock  
where the pony used to be.  
Everything,  
gone, as if  
nothing existed before  
and nothing after. (Clarke, 2015d)<sup>63</sup>

As I draw this inquiry to a close and negotiate my exit, however partial, I am moved by the ways in which I, personally, have been transformed by this experience. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) wrote, “neither researchers nor participants walk away from the inquiry unchanged” (p. 170). I recognize this inquiry has, over the course of the inquiry, changed me as a researcher and as an individual.

As the poem *Muskeg Revisited* suggests, we can never fully return to the exact place of our beginnings. The landscape shifts and changes over time. So, too, does our response to it. The muskeg where I grew up is still there, although the store we lived in is gone. The landscape now, though, is nearly unrecognizable to me. The trees have grown. The vegetation has filled



Muskeg Revisited.m4a

<sup>63</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.

in. Even the roads have been rerouted and changed. As I moved through this inquiry, I also changed and it is in reflection that those changes become apparent.

As a researcher and, in particular, as a narrative inquirer, I grew to understand the importance of remaining connected to experience in our inquiries. I learned to follow the threads of experience emerging from stories of experience wherever they led, despite my initial wonderings and the theoretical framework embedded in the inquiry. I also came to understand more deeply the ways in which my own experiences, my stories to live by, wove their way through my analysis of the participants' narratives. I could not escape myself, no matter how hard I might try. I learned that my voice during reflections was more honest when I accepted my own bias and declared it.

The gift of this experience as a researcher coming alongside participants living and learning on the edges of community has been a reframing of my own identity. I have found resilience in my own story I did not know existed. The landscape of my childhood has become less frightening. I have come to see how it is possible to view those experiences differently. The experience of engaging as a researcher in this inquiry has made it possible to imagine a new story for myself, a counterstory of reconnection and renewal. I have begun to restory myself as part of a larger community of researchers and educators, a community I move into and through freely.

### **Curriculum Making On The Edges of Community**

The stories the participants in this inquiry told about life and learning on the edges of community were rich with examples of how they were constantly engaged in curriculum making and identity making despite their positioning on the edges of community. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) helped me understand the interwoven nature of identity making and curriculum making. Identities shift and resituate in response to experiences of curriculum making. Although I focus in this section on the curriculum making of the participants in this inquiry, it is important to keep in mind that in many ways curriculum making engages identity making, and vice versa. It is very difficult to discuss one without touching on the other.

The participants in this inquiry engaged in a variety of curriculum making as they negotiated their experiences on the edges of community. A number of threads emerged as I

reflected on the curriculum making in which they engaged, particularly as it related to their positioning on the edges of community.

### **A Lived Curriculum on the Edges of Community**

As I reflected on the curriculum making of the participants in this inquiry, Aoki (2005a) helped me understand their curriculum making in light of their lived curriculum, which is to say, the life experiences they lived out from day to day, both in school and institutional settings and outside of those settings. For the participants in this inquiry, curriculum making consisted of much more than those planned acts of curriculum that occurred in classrooms, schools, or community organizations. These participants lived their curriculum making moments, incorporating them into their identity making and allowing them to define their positions within community.

As with all my reflections, my inquiry into the curriculum making of these participants positioned on the edges of community began with a question. What counterstories did they develop to support their life and learning on the edges of community? Our lived curriculum has a lasting impact on our sense of agency and our sense of ability. The counterstories related to curriculum making for these participants served to enhance their sense of agency and ability. At the same time, these counterstories of curriculum making also created tensions for the participants as they sought to renegotiate their positioning within community.

For the participants in this inquiry, their lived curriculum on the edges of community created tension-filled moments that required them to reflect on and reevaluate their positioning within community. They were often pulled between the expectations of their social milieux and their own understanding of what would be most effective for their own growth and the growth of the youth with whom they worked. What emerged as a common thread for all the participants and particularly for those participants who were teachers was the understanding that a lived curriculum included both school/institutional curriculum making, their practical knowledge, and curriculum making that drew on their personal knowledge. Clandinin (2013) wrote:

We understand that from a person's vantage point, knowledge is entwined with identity. A narrative way of thinking about identity speaks to the nexus of a person's personal practical knowledge, and the landscapes, past and present, on which a person lives and works. (p. 53)



The participants in this inquiry engaged their personal practical knowledge in curriculum making and identity making on the edges of community. Because of their positioning on the edges of community, these participants drew heavily on their personal experiences and familial curriculum making to negotiate their own learning and the learning of the youth they supported within schools and community programs on the edges of community.

### **Negotiating the Tensions Between Familial Curriculum Making and School Curriculum Making**

In this inquiry, the participants engaged various forms of curriculum making that accessed their personal experiences and knowledge as they lived and learned on the edges of community. The three teacher participants, in particular, experienced tensions as they sought to balance the requirements of school with the efficacy of accessing their personal knowledge shaped by familial curriculum making contexts in support of the youth they worked and lived alongside in classrooms and homes. One way the personal can be understood is as being formed in a familial curriculum-making world. Lugones (1987) helped me to understand the importance of traveling to the worlds of others in order to understand more fully their experiences. Likewise, the participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of Lugones' concept of world travelling by expressing in various ways how they attempted to see from the perspective of those people positioning them on the edges of community. Although Luanne described experiencing considerable tensions between her familial curriculum making and school curriculum making, she accessed her familial curriculum-making experiences to support her school curriculum making. Her experience of living on the edges of community and witnessing her children living on the edges of community created a strong desire in her to support other people's children in the school setting who were also positioned on the edges. She repeatedly identified ways in which her familial curriculum making shifted her practice as a teacher in a school curriculum making space to make her a more effective teacher. Likewise, Brooke accessed her out-of-school curriculum making and brought it into the work she did at the community organization for gender and sexually diverse youth. Even Jesse, who expressed a reluctance to interact with the youth she taught in a familial way, allowed her personal approach to parenting her own children to influence her professional practice when extraordinary circumstances required her to step beyond school curriculum making in order to support the youth in her program more effectively.

Although Liam and Rodriguez were not educated as teachers, both engaged in curriculum making that engaged their personal practical knowledge. Liam reframed the indifference of his teachers as part of a larger picture of social interaction in which all actions were interconnected. Because he defined himself as a fully-enfranchised subject with agency within his found communities, he was able to redefine his own positioning within community. In a similar way, Rodriguez's engagement as a performing musician could be viewed as an educational experience for his audiences that shifted their thinking and, ultimately, renegotiated his own positioning within community. His talent as a musician despite his visual impairment redefined for his audiences their definition of ability. Likewise, he created a liminal knowledge space for his audiences as they sought to make sense of his music, a space they inhabited together.

Despite the tensions created by the interplay of personal practical knowledge with the demands of school curriculum making, each participant described experiences in which they navigated those tensions successfully, incorporating their personal practical knowledge into their curriculum making. In many cases, accessing personal practical knowledge allowed them to engage in unique combinations of curriculum making that allowed them to engage positively with others in community.

### **The Curriculum of Community**

The curriculum making and identity making in this inquiry, understood as a course of life, occurred within a context for each of the participants. It has been difficult to isolate each individual thread. As I reflected on curriculum making in this inquiry, I recognized that it occurred, always, in community. As noted in Chapter Two, curriculum making in community is both dynamic and inconclusive, evoking a space of liminality that suggests the possibility for transformation (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003). As the experiences of Rodriguez attest, within that liminal space the opportunity for a curriculum of community emerged. For Rodriguez, public performances of music were an opportunity to engage his audiences in shared curriculum making moments. He talked about the space that opened up for his audience between what they were hearing and how their brains tried to make sense of what they were hearing. His interaction as the performer of the music created a co-composition of meaning or a community of learning. In this way, Rodriguez demonstrated the ways in which he engaged in a curriculum

of community. Making sense of his music required that he and his audience enter into community together. Community became the foundation for their shared understanding.

Rodriguez's curriculum of community reminded me of Schwab's (1973) contention that meaning lies as much in what is excluded as in what is included. When I apply this thinking to my growing understanding of a curriculum of community, it becomes apparent that inclusion and exclusion are part of the same action. Every act of inclusion is an act of exclusion. In Rodriguez's curriculum of community, entering into community was the only path through which meaning could be co-composed. To understand his music, the audience had to enter into community with him. His knowledge space, then, became a space for the recomposition of community, a community in which positioning was fluid and shifting.

### **Curriculum of Inclusion: Embracing Difference**

This inquiry confirmed for me that curricular reform to enhance inclusion must begin by exploring the narratives of people positioned on the edges of community. The stories these participants told of their lives and learning in those spaces shifted my thinking of marginalization and sparked the beginning of a reframing of the concepts related to positioning within community. When I consider the emphasis on inclusion in our schooling systems, I am struck by the assumptions carried forward about the constitution of inclusion versus exclusion and the disregard for the people whose lives are most affected by these concepts.

For the participants in this inquiry, the act of engaging in a curriculum of inclusion did not recognize the predominant metaphor of marginalization. These participants each sought a redefinition or reframing of their perceived positioning within community. Their renegotiation of their positioning within community impacted their professional practice, whether they were teachers, musicians, or students. Each articulated a deep understanding of the dominant narrative around life and learning on the edges of community and each sought to restory themselves in a way that gave them more agency and subjectivity than the dominant narrative of their positioning on the edges of community. As each participant created chosen communities around themselves nested within their found communities, they engaged in a curriculum of community in which relationship was the most important factor. Focusing on relationship allowed them to embrace difference not as a concept or ideological stance but rather as a concrete reality of their worlds.

### **Moving Through the Fluid Boundaries of Community**

In the course of reflecting on identity making and curriculum making, I have already mentioned much about the ways in which the participants in this inquiry entered into, negotiated, and created community around themselves. One area, however, is worth reflecting on separately. Anzaldua (1987) described the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (p. 25). For the participants in this inquiry, living and learning on the edges of community moved them into, through, and beyond the borderlands of their found communities. Their stories demonstrated a common thread – the participants in this inquiry bumped up against the expectations of their found communities, communities that often did not have a complex understanding of their experiences. Over and over the participants in this inquiry responded to attempts to position them on the edges of community by shaping chosen communities around themselves. They moved back and forth through the boundaries of their chosen and found communities freely and with self-determination. For many who were positioned as marginalized, the constructions of the found community were present but peripheral to their own positioning. Their communities of choice provided a harbor for them to express their identities openly and honestly. At the same time, they sustained connections to their found communities along with their connections to their chosen communities.

For the participants in this study, marginalization was a construction they rejected while, at the same time, recognizing its prevalence as part of the dominant narrative. The metaphor of marginalization was insufficient to describe their experiences. I found Lindemann Nelson’s (1995) concept of nested communities a much more useful metaphor to describe their experiences. For the participants in this inquiry, inclusion and exclusion existed simultaneously, as did the chosen and found communities that were nested one within the other. The notion of being positioned both inside and outside of community simultaneously evoked, for me, Anzaldua’s (1987) idea of the borderlands. In the stories of the participants in this inquiry, the borderlands or the edges of community were the spaces that defined community. They were the spaces that evoked identity making and curriculum making. They were the spaces that encouraged redefinition of community and the composition of chosen communities that existed both within and beyond the borders of their found communities.

For all of the participants in this inquiry, relationship was at the heart of community. Living in relationship with others who joined them in their chosen communities made successful community building possible. As I have mentioned before, the participants in this study welcomed difference as a necessary component of relationship. Recognizing connections of experience through difference laid the foundation for each of these participants to reshape a geography of belonging in which difference was a highly valued characteristic. The complexity of this process cannot be overemphasized. The stories the participants in this inquiry told about themselves and about the communities they moved through contained many contradictions and consistencies. Their experiences were individual. Though I have identified many common threads, their experiences cannot be reduced to generalizations. It is important to understand, then, that the complexity of their experiences demonstrated that even difference, itself, cannot be reduced to a category. We cannot say, we know this now about community or identity making or curriculum making and so, therefore, we should do that. In the end, I am left with a deepened understanding of life and learning on the edges of community and with a sense that there is a need to reframe our thinking about these spaces. I am reminded of the participant, Jesse, whose recognition of difference was the starting point for building relationship with the youth she taught. Jesse facilitated a curriculum of inclusion. For Jesse, inclusive community building was a matter of building relationships, of learning about each other, including about our differences, and sharing points of connection within those differences. How might our classrooms and learning spaces change if we began as Jesse did with a starting point of building relationships?

### **A Few Final Thoughts**

What have I left unsaid? As I ponder this question, the magpie that has visited me each morning for the last four days returns. This morning he calls to me in a triplet of chirps as he tap dances down the metal flange of the roof edge outside my window. He wants something, I think, or wants to remind me of something. He chirrups again – something is approaching. Something is about to appear.

Each thread in this inquiry has led to another question. If I pull on these threads, where will they lead? It would be so easy to create a manufactured ending, tie up all the loose threads and declare a universal truth from the details of these participants' experiences to make them fit

into something nice and neat and smooth. I am reminded that in narrative inquiry, we do not seek to reach a final conclusion but rather we look for the next puzzle.

I have mentioned many times throughout this dissertation that our understandings of the experiences of participants and the impact of those experiences on our thinking around educational practice can only ever be partial and inconclusive. Still, I am drawn by an urge to suggest some ways in which we might frame what we have learned here within a pronounced educational context. What have the things we've learned about identity making and curriculum making on the edges of community, even the things we have learned about community itself, suggest in terms of our educational practice? One thought emerged among all others. The experiences of these participants suggest positioning within community is less important than the relationships we share as teachers with the children and youth we support. Attention to the lived curriculum of the children and youth we teach, their lives, brings us into relationship with them. Entering into relationship requires a restructuring or reframing of community. Our classrooms, then, become knowledge spaces nested within whatever larger found communities the children and youth we teach experience. Rather than attempting to transform those found communities, our energies are better directed toward listening to, retelling, and recomposing stories of experience with those children and youth.

An emphasis on positioning within a found community makes invisible the identities and abilities of children and youth and subsumes them into categories. Within an educational context, such categorization often amounts to a pathologizing of difference. This is not to suggest that children's and youths' identities are not influenced by their positioning within community. The participants in this inquiry demonstrated through their stories of experience how profoundly they were each impacted by that positioning. At the same time, their stories had a strong thread of self-definition that was insubordinate to that positioning. In varied ways, the participants in this inquiry refused to be defined by others or as other. They recognized the dominant narratives that sought to position them on the edges of community while, at the same time, composed chosen communities that provided them with strong moral self-definition and created for them a strong sense of value. All of this occurred within a dominant narrative that positioned them as marginalized. Within that metaphor of marginalization was the assumption that those central to a community are more valuable to that community than those at the edges.

The experiences of the participants in this inquiry suggested, however, that those spaces conventionally thought of as peripheral, the edges, were actually the defining features of communities. If one locates value at the edges as much as or perhaps even more than at the centre, the metaphor of marginalization dissolves. The experiences of the participants in this inquiry suggested a more useful metaphor might be Lindemann Nelson's (1995) notion of nested communities, both found and chosen. If we think of communities as nested one within the other, then individuals remain at the centre of those communities. How would our practice as educators change if we shifted our thinking about those children and youth currently identified as at risk, whether through perceptions of disability, constructions of socio-economic and social status, gender and sexual diversity, or any of the many ways in which we currently identify difference? If we thought of each child or youth as central to a community nested within many communities, all of these communities become a source for supporting their learning.

### Magpie Mornings

On the edge of the roof  
below my window  
one magpie dances  
east, west, all along the eave.  
Its toes click and tap a message  
against the metal flange  
for the fourth morning  
in a row.

Nothing is what it seems,  
this much I know  
from his metallic clicks and hops.  
Pay attention.  
Something is coming.

Later, six magpies dance in a circle  
their heads and tails bob  
up, down, wings stretch, fold.  
Sudden clap and two rise  
spiral once then drift away.

I wake to the chuckle  
of my morning visitor

his white and blue pressed clean.  
In his beak, one red thread. (Clarke, 2014c)<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Click to access audio file of poem.



Magpie Mornings.m4a



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